

THE LONG WALK TO LEADERSHIP: ARE WOMEN THEIR OWN WORST ENEMIES?

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ABSTRACT

This study traces subordinate women's perceptions of the root causes of the rift and polarization between women in subordinate positions and women in super-ordinate positions and how this impacts female leadership emergence. Unlike many earlier studies on leadership, this investigation interrogates the feminine leadership crisis from the point of view of women in subordinate positions. Whilst using a case study research design, 50 female teachers from Gweru in Zimbabwe completed questionnaires while 10 officers from the Ministry of Women Affairs were interviewed. Descriptive statistics, mainly, frequencies and percentages were used to analyze data. The study reveals that women play a significant role in their own demise in leadership as they spent a lot of time and energy fighting each other. Most subordinate women expressed that they neither like nor support female leaders and prefer working under male leaders. This confirms the prevalence of the "Pull Her Down Syndrome". The study serves to remind women that a divided house falls and therefore, it encourages women to support and help each other in leadership circles in the true spirit of feminism.

Keywords: Intra-women Catfights, Leadership Emergence, Pull Her Down Syndrome, Women and Leadership

INTRODUCTION

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A number of studies have dwelt on the rift between female bosses and their female subordinates. Some of these are by Bettridge (2013), Brooks (2012) and Djaba (2012). According to these researchers, women in subordinate positions normally fight to bring down those women already in leadership positions bringing about the so-called Pull Her Down syndrome. Bettridge (2013) regards this as an ailment that truly negates women's chances of emerging as leaders. While a number of studies have exposed how these catfights are fought, there has been a lack of scientific study on the causes of the rift between female subordinates and female leaders, from the subordinate women's perspective. It is such a gap that this study seeks to fill.

According to Mutsagondo (2013), there are on average 16% female political leaders, 10% business leaders and 13% religious leaders in the world. A number of reasons have been advanced to explain why there were fewer female leaders than male leaders. Among these reasons are socio-cultural stereo-types championed by the patriarchy, lack of educational opportunities and lack of leadership confidence. However, of recent, a number of researches have also advanced the woman-centered factor, where it has been established that women also play a significant role in their demise in the leadership struggle. The million dollar question is 'Why do women fight against each other to the extent of pulling each other down at a time they were supposed to unite and fight against men in the struggle for leadership?'

The study is significant in as far as it forms the basis from where women can regroup and realistically launch a protracted struggle against men in leadership and for leadership positions. With a divided house, their walk towards leadership remains long, winding and without a destination in sight.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Djaba (2012), despite gender equality being high on the national agenda of most countries when a woman finds her way to the top, other women do very little to support her. He further argues that women are obsessed with negativity and also indulge in backbiting and competition. This has given rise to the Pull Her Down syndrome, which Djaba (2012) calls a moral disorder allergic to light, progress and development as it reveals women's weaknesses. Brooks (2012) labels the in-fighting amongst women a lack of sisterhood. A study from researchers at Washington University in St. Louis revealed that women in leadership roles often do not support other qualified female candidates as potential peers. According to Scott (2012), a recent study from the University of Ottawa showed a lot of intra-sexual competition amongst women. In that study, Vaillancourt suggests that women engage in cat-fighting and are

"intolerant" of "sexy" peers and use indirect aggression to slam potential rivals. Bettridge (2013) also argues that women can be harder on their own sex, to their own detriment.

Many subordinate women comment that their behavior is a direct response to the Queen Bee Syndrome. Baldoni (2013) holds that the Queen Bee Syndrome is a product of the 1970s researchers at the University of Michigan where it was revealed that women who made it to the top were unwilling to help fellow women up the ladder. Such women who assume the status of the queen bee have been given a number of labels like bullies (Baldoni, 2013), saboteurs (Turner, 2012) and tyrannies (Dobson and Iredale, 2006). The Queen Bee Syndrome holds that such women do not only have a zero interest in fostering the careers of fellow subordinate women (Baldoni, 2013), but also distance themselves from them, ruining their self-confidence and their professional standing in the process (Rushlimbaugh, 2013).

This study is informed by the concept of survival of the fittest. According to Morris (1974), the survival of the fittest concept holds that certain animals are able to adapt to a specific environmental condition better than others because of their given advantages. The fittest animals survive while those unfit die. Female leaders are the fittest while fellow women in subordinate positions are the unfit who eventually fall by the wayside.

The concept of survival of the fittest is the antithesis of the concept of feminism. According to Chauraya and Mugodzwa (2012), feminism is a social and political movement aimed at defending and expanding the rights of women. They also argue that feminism is an ideology which recognizes the systematic discrimination against women on the grounds of their gender. As a result, this study is based on the premise that women are expected feminist concept and any inclinations towards the survival of the fittest concept raise more questions than answers and thus making the study an interesting research area in contemporary leadership circles.

Research Objectives

The study sought to explore subordinate women's views on why there was a rift between female subordinates and female leaders and how such a position impacted on female leadership emergence. These objectives were examined under the research questions below:

- Why is there a rift between subordinate women and their female bosses?
- How widespread and prevalent is the rift between the two groups of women?
- What is the impact of the existence of this rift on female leadership emergence?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used case study research design, which is widely used research method in the social sciences. According to Zainal (2007), case study method is helpful especially when in-depth explanations of social behavior are sought and in small geographical areas with a limited number of subjects. Baxter and Jack (2008) adds that the research design is helpful in answering the “how” and “why” questions. The population in this study comprises of 440 subordinate female teachers, deputy headmistresses and headmistresses in Gweru Urban primary and secondary schools (Zimbabwe). Simple random sampling is used firstly to select 6 schools from the 22 in Gweru Urban and later to select 10 female teachers from each of the 6 schools. From the anticipated 60 questionnaire responses, 50 were obtained. Simple random sampling was selected because each item in the population has the same chance of being selected as part of the sample as any other item, thus making it a very reliable and authentic sampling method (Westfall, 2008).

Using purposive sampling, 10 women from Gweru district office’s Ministry of Women Affairs were chosen to take part in interviews. Purposive sampling was used because it allows a researcher to select only those informants adjudged to be knowledgeable about the data being sought (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The ten worked for a ministry that catered for the advancement of women’s issues and interests in the country and were thus adjudged to be competent to comment over feminine issues. Data was triangulated by using questionnaires and interviews in juxtaposition to secondary research. Questionnaires were chosen because they are easy to distribute to a large population and they often allow for anonymity (Babbie and Mouton, 2001) and as well, they are easy to encode and tabulate (Evans, 1988). Interviews were also chosen as research instruments for the following reasons; they have a high response rate, they give the researcher room to probe and can also be configured to generate various types of information (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Respondents were asked to participate voluntarily. They were also assured of confidentiality and that the research was being carried out for academic purposes only. Questionnaires were then distributed to the targeted respondents and collected a week later. Interviews were held with 10 female officers of the Ministry of Women Affairs at their Gweru District offices where the researcher recorded their responses. Data were analyzed under research questions stated above. Descriptive statistics, mainly, frequencies and percentages were used to analyze data. Some data were presented on tables.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Reasons for the Rift between Female Subordinates and Female Super-Ordinates

Female subordinates were asked to comment on their relations with their female leaders. Twenty-eight women (56%) commented that their relations with their female leaders were not good. Twelve (24%) stated that their relations were fair, six (12%) stated that their relations were good and only four (8%) said they were very good. This was rather worrisome as this largely showed prevalence of bad blood between female subordinates and their female leaders in the workplaces. The ‘fair to not good’ response categories had an aggregate response of 80 percent, pointing to serious polarization between the womenfolk. Seven out of ten female interviewees (70 percent) also indicated that relations between female leaders and female subordinates were really bad and that the issue was a cause for concern.

Subordinate Women’s Reasons for Sour Relations

The following were female subordinates’ reasons for the prevalence of the not so good relations between female leaders and female followers. Table 1 below shows questionnaire respondents’ reasons for the prevalence of sour relations between female subordinates and female leaders.

TABLE 1
Reasons for Sour Relations (n = 50)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Arrogant	16	32
All knowing	11	22
Too bossy	8	16
Not supportive	11	22
Pretenders	4	8
Total	50	100

Arrogance

Arrogance by female leaders was cited by female subordinates as the major reason for the prevalence of bad relations between women. This was cited by 16 female teachers (32 %). Arrogance was shown in a number of areas and those cited by the respondents included qualifications, power, cars and organizational influence. Six of the ten interviewees indicated that the situation got worse when a subordinate appeared to be in a better socio-economic position than the leader. Some of the socio-economic advantages that were cited included a situation where a subordinate was married to a very rich or influential husband or a situation where a subordinate was “happily” married while as the boss was either unmarried or in a shaky

marriage.

“All-Knowing” Female Bosses

The rift between the two groups was also caused by some bosses “I-know-it-all-attitude”. Eleven female teachers (22 %) revealed that they were not comfortable with female heads and female deputy heads who claimed to know everything. Some heads and deputy heads in secondary schools were accused of being super-teachers who were specialists in all subject areas, for example sciences, arts and commercials and were in the habit of instructing their subordinates how things should be done, right across the curricula.

Too Bossy

Eight respondents (16 %) indicated that female leaders were too bossy. Several examples were given as evidence of “being too bossy”, among them being;

- Tracking subordinates up and down during the discharge of duty.
- Expecting subordinates to carry out assigned duties to the last letter.
- Shouting and at times insulting subordinates.
- Persistently making threats of charges, suspension and expulsion.

Although female interviewees were not asked to compare male and female leaders, most interviewees claimed that male leaders were less bossy and thus made better leaders than women.

Not Supportive

Eleven subordinate female teachers (22 %) claimed that there was a rift between female leaders and their followers because female leaders were not supportive. Their argument was that female subordinates looked up to their female counterparts in privileged positions, like heads of schools for inspiration, assistance and uplifting. Instead, they now realized that fellow women who made it to the top often slammed the door in their face, closing avenues for them to reach the top as well. One respondent likened the situation to a female leader removing the ladder once she got to the top, making it virtually impossible for those below to make it to the top as well. This could be shown by the appointment of male and not female teachers, in acting positions, for example, as Heads of Departments or as senior teachers by female heads. Acting experience is many times a necessary condition for promotion to substantive posts, thus its denial implies lessened chances for subordinate women to emerge as leaders. This confirmed the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome cited in the literature review.

Pretension

Four respondents (8 percent) were not comfortable with female leaders' pretense. They claimed that some female leaders pretended to be hardworking and professional, while the opposite was true. They revealed that some female leaders were lazy, incompetent and very unprofessional. The respondents indicated that such female bosses concealed their weakness by being hard on their followers, particularly female subordinates, as if to compensate for their own shortfalls.

Level of Support Rendered to Female Leaders by Female Subordinates

Subordinate female teachers were asked to state how much support they rendered to their female bosses. The results were not impressive. Forty-two percent of female subordinates revealed that they were not ready to fully support their female bosses. Only 8 percent claimed that they were ready to do so. The table below shows the responses in full.

TABLE 2
Level of Support Given to Female Leaders by Female Subordinates

Level of support given	Frequency	Percentage
Not good	21	42
Fair	19	38
Good	6	12
Very Good	4	8
Total	50	100

The Prevalence and Extent of Polarization

In order to establish the extent of the polarization interviewees were asked their preference between working under a male or female supervisor. It was alarming to note that 70 percent of women who were interviewed preferred working under a male leader than under a female leader. Secondly, they were asked whom they would vote for if leaders were voted into their positions. Sixty percent of women who were interviewed stated that if leaders were voted for, they would vote for male leaders. The very high response rate in men's favour clearly demonstrated that female leaders and female subordinates were largely like water and oil which do not mix.

Manifestations of Bad Relations

Unofficial dressing competition. A silent 'war' between the two groups is fought on many fronts. Four interviewees (40%) held that a war was usually fought between the two

groups. This was usually manifested in women's bid to out-do each other in terms of fashion and dressing. For example, when a female boss bought a new dress, some female subordinates would do anything in their power to out-do her by buying a "better" quality one. Once this was done, the subordinate group psychologically felt that they won the "war". At the same time, the female boss would not take this lightly. For the super-ordinate, the subordinate's new purchase is a direct challenge which cannot be taken for granted. This competition went beyond dresses to include hair styles, phones, lunch packs and poshy cars.

Gossip and back-biting. The undeclared war between female leaders and their subordinates can also be easily seen through the prevalence of gossip and back-biting between the two groups. Through probing, some interviewees held that digging into bosses' social life was not uncommon for purposes of the grapevine. They dug into their bosses' spouses, relations, children, housing, financial situation and recreation, to mention a few. The subordinates claimed they did so because their female leaders also did the same to them. It was unfortunate that the researcher could not ascertain this allegation, but what is very clear is that if the situation is left unresolved, polarization between female subordinates and their female leaders is set to continue.

Failure to willfully obey lawful orders. Two interviewees (20 %) argued that friction between the two groups was also shown by failure on the part of subordinates to willfully obey lawful orders. One could simply choose not to carry out some duties as expected or as assigned. This resulted in many female leaders resorting to using the autocratic leadership style to make sure the job was done. Unfortunately, in many cases, the use of force breeds resentment, and thus further widening the gulf between the two groups.

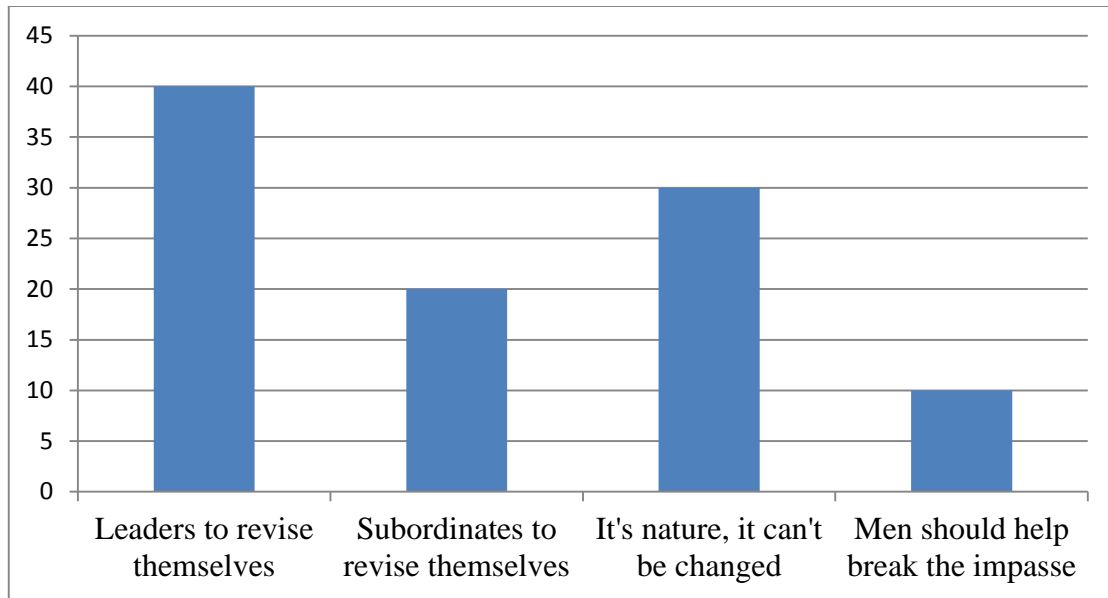
Go-slows in undertaking duties. Some subordinates agreed that they did not take lightly being assigned duties by a fellow woman. They carried out their tasks, but dragged their feet, as a way of 'fixing' the boss. For them, such action restored the psychological imbalance of being nagged by a fellow woman.

Interviewees' views on how to break the impasse. Through interviews, respondents were asked how the impasse between female subordinates and leaders could be resolved. The majority of the respondents (40 percent) blamed their female leaders. They argued that female bosses should climb down for sanity to prevail. Thirty percent argued that the impasse between the two groups was natural and so it could not be changed. Such rationality confirms Charles Darwin's survival of the fittest concept, which has been discussed in the literature review. It was encouraging to note that there were some women (20 %) who were rather objective as they realized that they too as subordinates also had a part to play for harmony to prevail. Ten percent

of the respondents shifted the blame to men, accusing men of not playing a part to bring together the two “warring parties” to a progressive dialogue and result. The respondents’ views are displayed on Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1

Views on Breaking the Impasse between Female Followers and Female Leaders



The impact of polarization on female leadership emergence. The rift between female leaders and female subordinates does not augur well for female leadership emergence. Regardless of feminist conventions and pro-women constitutions of many countries, men will thus continue to dominate in leadership circles as women continue fighting unending cat-wars. Unless the impasse is seriously addressed, only a few women will continue to rub shoulders with a multitude of men in the corridors of leadership and in company boardrooms.

It was amazing to note that the majority of questionnaire respondents in this study (82 percent) agreed that conflict between subordinate women and super-ordinate women was counter-productive as it greatly weakened women’s chances of making it to the top as well as enabling them to compete against men. One interviewee argued that the problem with subordinate women was that they failed to realize that whilst they were pursuing the “Pull Her Down” theme, female leaders were also busy singing the “Leave Her Down’ tune. As a result, not many female leaders are very prepared to uplift their own folk into positions of leadership. The unending “silent war” between women leaders and subordinates thus greatly weakens women’s chances of becoming leaders.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This work has shown the root causes of the rift between female leaders and female subordinates. Female subordinates mainly blamed their female leaders for looking down upon them and so the majority of them boldly stated that they were not willing to render their support to their female leaders. Most female subordinates expressed that they would prefer male to female leaders. Although the majority of female subordinates felt that the impasse could be resolved, at the moment, the rift between the two groups of women seems to be more of a reality than illusion. Such polarization negatively affects female leadership emergence.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can help break the impasse between female leaders and female subordinates:

- Female subordinates should accept that they are in a subordinate position and should respect their female leaders.
- Female leaders should also respect women in the lower echelons of the organizational hierarchy.
- Female leaders should uplift other women and through doing so, earn the love and respect of their female subordinates.
- Women should end their cat-fights and cooperate in the true spirit of feminism.

Future Work

A number of studies have dealt with the issue of women pulling each other down. The present study examined reasons behind the rift between the two groups of women, the super-ordinate and the subordinate. It is the author's contention that related studies in the future should focus on how female leaders and female subordinates can work together, support and uplift each other in the true spirit of feminism, lest women's walk to leadership remain a mirage.

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