

# FEMALE HEAD TEACHERS IN RURAL ZAMBIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: LIVED EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND COPING STRATEGIES

**Kamizhi Mulambwa Ephraim**

*Kwame Nkrumah University (Zambia)*

ephraimngubu@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6993-1980>

**Dr. Sr. Musonda Astridah**

*Kwame Nkrumah University (Zambia)*

musonde2008@yahoo.com

**Critical Journal of Social Sciences  
(CJSS)**

ISSN: 3101-0415



Volume 2, No. 1 | 2026

pp. 100 – 119



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66830/09x6wb40>

Received: April 1, 2026 / Accepted: July 10, 2026

## Abstract

Despite national gender policies, female head teachers remain grossly underrepresented in rural Zambian primary schools, with only 11 out of 74 schools in Kalabo District led by women. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences and challenges of female head teachers in six primary schools in Kalabo District, Zambia. Drawing on Eagly's social role theory and role congruity theory, the research investigates how gender stereotypes and institutional barriers shape female leadership. Data were collected through semi structured questionnaires, in depth interviews, and focus group discussions with 61 participants, including head teachers, teachers, and district education officers. Thematic analysis revealed that female head teachers' experiences are dichotomous: positive when supported by communities and staff, negative when facing cultural resistance and institutional neglect. Key challenges include socio cultural rejection of female authority, male teacher insubordination, political intimidation, lack of support from district offices, and the dual burden of work and family. Coping strategies such as delegation, professional development, community engagement, and record keeping demonstrate resilience. The findings confirm role incongruity, as leadership is stereotypically perceived as masculine, creating prejudice against female leaders. The study concludes that sustainable gender transformation in rural school leadership requires multi-level interventions: gender sensitization, formal mentorship, district level policy reforms, and protection mechanisms against political retaliation. Recommendations are provided for policy makers and practitioners.

## Keywords

Female head teachers; primary school management; gender challenges; rural education; Zambia; phenomenological study; social role theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership remains a persistent challenge despite decades of advocacy for gender equality. According to UNESCO (2022), women constitute the majority of teachers in primary education worldwide often exceeding 70% in many countries yet they hold fewer than 30% of headship positions. This phenomenon, often termed the “glass ceiling” or “leadership gap,” reflects deep-rooted gender ideologies that associate leadership with masculine traits (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In sub-Saharan Africa, the gap is even more pronounced, with cultural norms and patriarchal structures frequently relegating women to subordinate roles (Mahlase, 1997; Odejide, 2007). Zambia, the focus of this study, is no exception. Despite the introduction of the National Gender Policy in 2014, which aims to increase women’s representation in decision-making positions, female head teachers remain a minority in primary schools, especially in rural districts (MoGE, 2014; Chonya, 2006).

Globally, scholarship on gender and leadership has increasingly recognized that the barriers women face are not merely individual biases but are embedded in broader social structures and institutional norms. Research from across the Global South illuminates how patriarchal systems, compounded by colonial legacies and cultural traditions, systematically constrain women’s access to leadership in both public and educational sectors (Rao & Kelleher, 2005). In South Asia, for instance, women in higher education leadership continue to navigate deeply entrenched gender hierarchies despite formal policy commitments to equity (Biswakarma, 2024; Mathew & Nair, 2022). These comparative perspectives are instructive for understanding the Zambian context, as they reveal that the challenges facing female head teachers in Kalabo District are not unique but reflect a shared global pattern of role incongruity reinforced by local cultural logics.

Kalabo District, located in Western Province, exemplifies this disparity. The district is characterized by geographical isolation, limited infrastructure, and strong adherence to traditional Lozi customs, where gender roles are rigidly defined. Out of 74 primary schools, only 11 are headed by women a statistic that raises critical questions about the barriers female educators face and the nature of their experiences when they do assume leadership. While previous studies in Zambia have examined the effectiveness of female head teachers in urban settings (Muchelemba, 2001; Chonya, 2006), little is known about the subjective, lived experiences of their rural counterparts. The voices of these women, navigating complex cultural landscapes while managing schools, have remained largely unheard.

The quality of school leadership is widely recognized as a key determinant of school effectiveness and student outcomes (Pont et al., 2008). In rural contexts, where resources are scarce and communities often rely heavily on the school as a social hub, the role of the head teacher is particularly demanding. When women occupy this role, they often confront not only the routine challenges of school management but also gender-based prejudice, isolation, and resistance from staff, parents, and even higher education authorities (Celikten, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989). Understanding these experiences is essential for designing policies that genuinely support gender equity in education leadership.

This study is guided by Eagly's social role theory (1987) and its extension, role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Social role theory posits that gender stereotypes arise from the division of labor and cultural expectations; women are associated with communal traits (e.g., nurturing, helpfulness) and men with agentic traits (e.g., assertiveness, dominance). Role congruity theory argues that prejudice against female leaders emerges because leadership is stereotypically perceived as requiring agentic qualities, creating a perceived incongruity between the female gender role and the leader role. This theoretical lens is particularly apt for examining the experiences of female head teachers in Kalabo, where traditional gender norms are strong.

The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences of female head teachers in managing primary schools in Kalabo District? (2) What challenges do they encounter? (3) How do they cope with these challenges? By answering these questions, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights for policy makers, district education officials, and practitioners seeking to promote gender equity in rural school leadership. The findings are intended to inform interventions that address both the overt and subtle barriers that limit women's participation and success in headship roles.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach that seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2018). Phenomenology is well suited for exploring how female head teachers make meaning of their leadership roles, as it prioritizes subjective perceptions, feelings, and interpretations over objective measurements. By setting aside the researcher's preconceptions (bracketing), the design allows the participants' voices to emerge authentically. This approach aligns with the study's aim to capture the nuanced, context bound experiences of women managing primary schools in a rural Zambian district.

### 2.2. Study Area and Participants

The research was conducted in Kalabo District, Western Province, Zambia. Kalabo is one of the most remote districts in the country, with limited road networks, unreliable electricity, and poor mobile phone coverage. The population is predominantly Lozi speaking, and traditional governance structures, including village headmen and the Mbwanjikana (chieftains), hold significant influence. The district has 74 primary schools, of which 11 are headed by women. This study focused on six of these female headed schools, selected purposively to represent variations in location (remote vs. peri urban), school size, and years of headship experience. The selection of six schools (out of eleven female-headed schools in the district) was guided by the principle of purposive maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015), which seeks to capture the widest range of experiences within a bounded case. Schools were selected to vary across three key dimensions: (a) proximity to the district administrative center (three remote schools located more than 30 km from Kalabo BOMA, and three peri-urban schools within 10 km); (b) school size (small schools with fewer than 300 pupils and larger schools with more than 500 pupils); and (c) the head teacher's years of experience in the post (ranging from less than one year to more than five years). This deliberate variation enabled the researchers to explore whether and how context shapes the nature of female head teachers' experiences, thereby strengthening the transferability of the findings.

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to identify all female head teachers in the selected schools and teachers in management positions. Snowball sampling was employed to recruit district education officers, starting with the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) who then referred the researcher to other relevant officers. The final sample comprised 61 participants: 6 female head teachers, 30 female teachers in primary school management (e.g., deputy heads, senior teachers), 20 class teachers (10 males, 10 female), and 5 district educational officers (including the DEBS, two Education Standards Officers, and two planning officers). This diverse sample enabled a multi perspective understanding of the phenomenon.

### 2.3. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using three main instruments to ensure triangulation and richness (Creswell, 2013). First, semi structured questionnaires were administered to all 61 participants. These questionnaires contained both closed ended items (to gather demographic and frequency data) and open ended questions (to elicit detailed narratives). Second, in depth interviews were conducted with the 5 district educational officers and 3 of the female head teachers. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were guided by an interview protocol that explored experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of gender and leadership. Third, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with teachers from each school (total 6 FGDs, each with 6-8 participants). FGDs provided a forum

for collective reflection on the challenges and strengths of female leadership. Additionally, document analysis of school logbooks, inspection reports, and district gender records supplemented the primary data.

All instruments were developed in English, the official language of education in Zambia, and were piloted with a group of teachers from a neighbouring district to refine clarity and cultural appropriateness. During FGDs and interviews, participants were allowed to use local languages (Lozi or Silozi) when they felt more comfortable, and the researcher, a native speaker, translated responses during transcription.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Transcripts were read and re read, and initial codes were manually applied to segments of text. These codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed against the data set and refined. Final themes were defined and named, ensuring they captured the essence of the participants' experiences. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize closed ended responses, presented in tables to support the qualitative findings.

NVivo software was used to assist with coding and organization. To ensure analytical rigor, the thematic coding process was conducted in two independent rounds. In the first round, the lead researcher coded all transcripts manually, generating 187 initial codes across the data set. In the second round, a second researcher independently coded a 30% random subsample of transcripts, and the two sets of codes were compared. Inter-rater reliability was established through discussion and consensus, with a final agreement rate of 89% after reconciliation.

Candidate themes were then reviewed in two stages: first, against the coded data extracts to confirm internal coherence; and second, against the full data set to confirm that each theme adequately represented the breadth of relevant data. Theme validation was further supported through member checking, in which a thematic summary was shared with three head teachers and two district officers, who confirmed that the themes accurately reflected their experiences. The three major themes that emerged were subsequently peer-debriefed with a colleague experienced in qualitative educational research, providing an additional layer of confirmability.

## 2.5. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation of data sources (head teachers, teachers, officers), methods (questionnaires, interviews, FGDs), and investigators (two researchers cross checked coding). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with three head teachers and two officers to confirm accuracy. Prolonged engagement (three months in the field) and reflexivity (maintaining a researcher journal) further strengthened validity.

Ethical approval was obtained from Kwame Nkrumah University's Research Ethics Committee. Permission was granted by the Kalabo District Education Board and the heads of the participating schools. All participants gave written informed consent, after being assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms (e.g., School A, School B; participants coded as HT<sub>1</sub>, HT<sub>2</sub>, etc.) were used to protect identities. Data were stored securely, and only the research team had access. The University Research Ethics Committee approval constitutes the institutional equivalent of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, fulfilling the internationally recognized requirements for ethical oversight of human subjects research (Israel & Hay, 2006). The approval reference number was KNU/REC/2019. The committee reviewed the research protocol, participant information sheets, and consent forms prior to data collection, thereby satisfying the institutional requirement that ethical clearance precede participant engagement.

### 3. FINDINGS

The findings are presented under three main themes, each with sub-themes, that emerged from the data analysis: (1) Experiences of female head teachers: a tale of two realities; (2) Multifaceted challenges: from cultural rejection to political intimidation; (3) Coping strategies: resilience through agency and support.

#### 3.1 Experiences of Female Head Teachers: A Tale of Two Realities

The six female head teachers described their experiences in starkly different terms, reflecting the influence of context and support structures. As shown in Table 1, three (50%) rated their experience as "good," two (33%) as "bad," and one (17%) as "not sure."

**Table 1. Female head teachers' experiences in managing primary schools**

| Responses | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| Good      | 3         | 50%            |
| Bad       | 2         | 33%            |
| Not sure  | 1         | 17%            |

|              |            |             |
|--------------|------------|-------------|
| <b>Total</b> | <b>N=6</b> | <b>100%</b> |
|--------------|------------|-------------|

Source: Fieldwork, 2019

### 3.1.1. Positive experiences: Support and recognition

For head teachers who reported positive experiences, the common thread was the presence of supportive stakeholders. HT<sub>3</sub>, head of School B, explained:

*"As long as the female head teacher is supported and as long as the people are willing to accept female heads despite their gender, then it's much possible to be efficient. This makes all the experience good and exciting."*

HT<sub>4</sub> (School D) echoed this sentiment, noting that her staff had "embraced" her leadership, and the community had become active partners through the PTA. She remarked, *"Being in management is one of my best career experiences; it means a lot to my career growth."* Similarly, HT<sub>1</sub> (School C) said, *"It's a good experience to be in management of primary school; it is purely motivation to encourage further hard work."*

These positive experiences were often linked to proximity to the district center, better infrastructure, and a history of female leadership in the school. In Schools B and D, which were located within 10 km of Kalabo BOMA (the district administrative center), the heads reported that the community was more accustomed to women in authority roles, and the district office provided timely support.

### 3.1.2 Negative experiences: Isolation and resistance

In contrast, head teachers in more remote schools faced a different reality. HT<sub>2</sub> (School E) and HT<sub>5</sub> (School F) described their experiences as "bad," citing constant questioning of their authority and lack of respect. HT<sub>2</sub> stated:

*"Men underrate us and they think we are less capable to lead. The community consider women to be kitchen assets and not school administrators. Therefore, without this full support my experience is bad in managing a primary school which is even in a remote area."*

HT<sub>5</sub> recounted an incident where a male teacher openly challenged her authority during a staff meeting, shouting that he "would not take orders from a woman." She noted that the district office was slow to respond when she reported the behavior, leaving her feeling unsupported and vulnerable. For these head teachers, the experience was characterized by constant battles for legitimacy, fear of sabotage, and a sense of isolation.

### 3.1.3 Uncertainty and initial adjustment

One head teacher (HT6, School A) had been in post for only four months and described her experience as “50/50.” She explained,

*“I do not really care what men think of me, am not just sure yet because I have less than 6 months’ experience. I can’t really judge because everything seems 50/50.”* Her uncertainty highlights the early-career challenges that female heads face, where they are still navigating relationships and establishing their authority.

When all participants (n=61) were asked whether there is a relationship between sex and effective headship, the majority stated that leadership has nothing to do with gender, reflecting a belief in gender-neutral leadership. However, another group insisted that leadership is “for men,” citing physical strength and authority as masculine domains. Four were unsure.

## 3.2 Multifaceted Challenges: From Cultural Rejection to Political Intimidation

The vast majority of participants agreed that female head teachers face significant challenges. Table 2 presents the challenges most frequently cited.

**Table 2. Challenges encountered by female head teachers**

| Responses                                |
|------------------------------------------|
| Not accepted by some quarters of society |
| Males do not consider them capable       |
| Teacher truancy                          |
| Lack of support from higher offices      |
| Unknown factors                          |

Source: Fieldwork, 2019

### 3.2.1 Socio-cultural rejection and gender stereotypes

The most prevalent challenge was lack of acceptance by some sections of society. This was not merely a matter of passive disrespect but manifested in concrete actions: parents refusing to attend meetings called by female heads, PTA executives bypassing the head to communicate directly with the DEBS, and community members referring to female heads as “girls” regardless of their age. A teacher in an FGD (School F) stated: *“When a woman is head, some parents think they can walk in anytime and demand things. With male heads, they would not dare.”*

The perception that leadership is inherently male was deeply embedded. A female teacher participant noted, *"In our culture, a woman is supposed to be behind, not in front. When you see a woman leading, people say her husband is not taking care of her, or she has failed as a wife."* This cultural framing creates a constant need for female heads to prove themselves, often at great psychological cost.

### 3.2.2 Male insubordination and resistance

Closely related was the challenge of male teachers not considering female heads capable. Participants described a pattern of passive-aggressive behavior: male teachers arriving late, leaving early, failing to follow instructions, and sometimes openly mocking the head. HT2 (School E) reported:

*"Men are rude towards the female head teachers. They do not like contributing to anything and they do what they want and not what they are told. I have one teacher who comes to school drunk and uses abusive language. When I tried to write a report, the DEBS did nothing."*

In extreme cases, male teachers used threats. HT5 (School F) shared:

*"A teacher threatened the head that if she continues reporting him for not coming for work she will lose her job or be sent to the remotest areas of the district as the teacher has political connection and backup."*

This insubordination is not merely a matter of individual misconduct; it reflects a gendered power dynamic where male teachers, accustomed to male authority, resist female leadership.

### 3.2.3 Lack of institutional support

Lack of support from higher offices emerged as a critical challenge. Female heads reported that when they sought intervention from the district education office regarding disruptive staff or community issues, they were often met with inaction or were told to "handle it themselves." HT4 (School D) explained:

*"The ministry of general education officials at the district level are too passive and in most cases do not even help when issues are raised from school. I remember reporting*

*some of my male teachers who never reported for work for the whole term (4 months) but the administrators gave false promises that they will call them which never happened. It is so discouraging."*

This lack of support is compounded by the fact that the district office itself is male-dominated; during the time of the study, only one of the five district officers was female. Female heads perceived that male officers were less empathetic to their challenges and sometimes shared in the same stereotypes.

### 3.2.4 Political intimidation and interference

Several participants described political intimidation as a growing challenge, particularly when local politics intersect with school governance. HT<sub>1</sub> (School C) recounted:

*"I was threatened that I will be expelled by the carders because one of the carders' wife is my teacher and she reported me to the husband simply for telling her to be time conscious when reporting for work. Everything was interpreted that I hate my fellow teachers and that I deserve to be suspended or retired on national interest as my caution for time management made them alien me to be in the opposition party."*

Such incidents reveal the vulnerability of female heads to politically motivated attacks, where their authority is undermined not through educational channels but through political pressure. In a context where political loyalty often dictates appointments and transfers, female heads feel compelled to tread carefully, sometimes at the expense of enforcing discipline.

### 3.2.5 Dual responsibilities and psychological burden

The dual burden of work and family was raised by many participants, though it was not as frequently cited as socio-cultural factors. One head teacher, a mother of three young children, explained:

*"I leave home at 6 a.m. and return after 5 p.m. I still have to cook, help with homework, and be a wife. My husband complains that the school takes all my time. Sometimes I cry at night, but in the morning I must be strong for the school."*

This balancing act is exacerbated by the fact that many female heads in Kalabo are posted far from their families, as few choose to relocate due to limited housing and facilities. The

psychological toll is significant: anxiety about safety, fear of failure, and the loneliness of being a female leader in a male-dominated environment.

### 3.2.6 Other limiting factors

When asked to identify factors that limit their effectiveness, female head teachers cited cultural beliefs, poor funding, workload, intimidation and level of education (Figure 1). Teachers' perspectives (Figure 2) added poor leadership skills (at one school), lack of support from fellow teachers, poor accommodation, and lack of electricity. These variations by school highlight the importance of local context.

## 3.3 Coping Strategies: Resilience Through Agency and Support

Despite the formidable challenges, female head teachers employed a range of strategies to cope and maintain effectiveness. Table 3 summarizes the strategies reported.

**Table 3. Strategies employed to cope with challenges**

| Responses                               |
|-----------------------------------------|
| Delegation of duties                    |
| Upgrading/attending leadership seminars |
| Community involvement (PTA)             |
| Working with learners/sharing vision    |
| Record keeping                          |
| Work plans and teaching roles           |

Source: Fieldwork, 2019

### 3.3.1 Delegation of duties

Delegation was the most frequently mentioned strategy. By distributing responsibilities among trusted staff members, female heads reduced their workload and built a sense of shared ownership. HT1 explained:

*"I have a strong senior teacher and a head of department who handle many routine matters. I focus on planning and representing the school outside. This way, I am not overwhelmed, and the team feels empowered."*

A district officer confirmed the importance of delegation: *"Heads manage running primary schools by identifying able, talented, specialized teachers and share responsibilities with them."*

### 3.3.2 Professional development and upgrading

Nineteen percent of participants emphasized the importance of further studies and attending leadership seminars such as the Headteacher Leadership and Management Programme (HEADLAMP) and Educational Leadership and Management (ELM) courses. HT3 noted:

*"The training I got through HEADLAMP taught me how to manage conflict and handle difficult teachers. It gave me confidence that I have the skills, even if some people doubt me because I am a woman."*

Upgrading qualifications also serves to counter the stereotype that women lack competence. By earning diplomas and degrees, female heads arm themselves with formal credentials that command respect.

### 3.3.3 Community involvement and PTA engagement

Engaging the community, particularly through the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), was a key strategy. HT4 described how she transformed the PTA from a critical body into a supportive one:

*"I invited them to see our challenges, involved them in decision-making, and asked for their advice. Now they see me as a partner, not an outsider. They even helped build a staff house."*

When community members feel included, they are more likely to accept female leadership and defend the head against detractors.

### 3.3.4 Working with learners and sharing the school vision

Sixteen percent of participants mentioned the importance of connecting with learners. HT5 stated: *"The learners look up to me. I talk to them about my vision for the school, that we will have good grades, a clean environment, and be a model school. They remind me why I am here."*

Sharing the vision creates a sense of common purpose and mobilizes the entire school community around goals that transcend gender politics.

### 3.3.5 Record keeping and organizational tools

Record keeping and work plans were cited as practical tools that help female heads maintain control and accountability. HT2 noted: *"I keep a diary of everything attendance, incidents, meeting minutes. When someone complains, I have evidence. It protects me and shows that I am professional."* In contexts where their word might be doubted, documentation provides objective proof of their diligence.

### 3.3.6 Mentorship and peer support

Although not captured in the frequency table, many participants highlighted the importance of informal mentorship from retired female heads or supportive male colleagues. One head teacher recalled: *"When I was appointed, an experienced retired head teacher (a woman) visited me and told me to be strong, to delegate, and to not let them see me cry. Her words carried me through the first months."* Such peer networks are vital but are currently informal and fragile.

## 3.4 Summary of Findings

The findings paint a complex picture: female head teachers in rural Kalabo navigate a landscape where their leadership is simultaneously celebrated and contested. Positive experiences are contingent on support from staff, community, and district offices, while negative experiences are shaped by deep-seated gender stereotypes, institutional neglect, and political interference. The challenges are multifaceted cultural, institutional, psychological, and political and require equally multifaceted coping strategies. These findings set the stage for a discussion that links them to theoretical frameworks and existing literature.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The discussion interprets the findings through the lens of Eagly's social role theory and role congruity theory, while also engaging with related literature on gender and educational leadership in African contexts. The central argument is that the experiences and challenges of female head teachers in Kalabo District are fundamentally shaped by the perceived incongruity between the feminine gender role and the leadership role, a incongruity that is reinforced by cultural norms, institutional practices, and political dynamics.

#### 4.1 Social Role Theory and the Gendering of Leadership

Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) posits that gender stereotypes arise from the historical division of labor, where women were primarily responsible for domestic and nurturing tasks, and men for public and agentic roles. In Kalabo, traditional gender roles remain strongly demarcated: women are expected to be caregivers, submissive to their husbands, and focused on the home; men are expected to be decision-makers, providers, and authority figures. When a woman becomes a head teacher, she violates these expected roles, leading to cognitive dissonance among community members, staff, and even district officials. As one teacher put it, *"In our culture, a woman is supposed to be behind, not in front."*

This violation triggers what role congruity theory describes as prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The head teacher is seen as either too feminine (and therefore weak) or too masculine (and therefore unfeminine). The "double-bind" described in the literature (Shakeshaft, 1989) was evident in the participants' accounts: if a female head is collaborative and nurturing, she is perceived as not "tough enough"; if she is assertive and directive, she is labeled as aggressive or "bossy." This double-bind makes it difficult for female heads to adopt a leadership style that is consistently accepted.

The finding that majority of participants still believe leadership is "for men" illustrates the internalization of these stereotypes, even among some teachers and officers. This internalization creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: when staff believe a female head cannot be effective, they may behave in ways that make it difficult for her to succeed, thereby "proving" their belief correct.

#### 4.2 Socio-Cultural Rejection as Manifestation of Role Incongruity

The most frequently cited challenge lack of acceptance by some quarters of society is a direct manifestation of role incongruity. In communities where male authority is the norm, a female head represents an anomaly. Participants described how PTA executives would bypass the head and communicate directly with the DEBS, effectively treating her as a non-entity. This is consistent with findings from other African studies. Mahlase (1997) documented how black women principals in South Africa were often dismissed as "girls" and excluded from decision-making. Similarly, Celikten (2005) found that female principals in Turkey faced resistance from parents and community members who viewed schools as masculine domains.

The cultural framing of women as "kitchen assets" (as one head teacher lamented) relegates them to the private sphere, making their presence in the public sphere of school leadership suspect. This is not merely a matter of prejudice; it has material consequences. Female heads in remote schools reported that parents were less willing to contribute labor or resources to school projects when led by a woman, and that community meetings were

poorly attended. In some cases, traditional leaders (village headmen) openly questioned the wisdom of appointing a woman to head a school.

#### *4.3 Male Insubordination and the Challenge to Authority*

Male teacher insubordination, reported by majority participants, can be understood as a gendered response to role incongruity. When male teachers are accustomed to being led by other men, a female head challenges their sense of hierarchy and masculinity. The behaviors described truancy, drunkenness, open defiance are not just individual acts of misconduct but symbolic acts of resistance that aim to re-establish male dominance. Similar patterns have been observed in other contexts. In Kenya, Karuiki (2007) found that female principals faced “subtle and overt resistance” from male staff, which sometimes forced them to adopt autocratic styles as a defensive mechanism.

The threat of political connections used by male teachers adds another layer: it invokes external power structures (political carders) to intimidate the female head, leveraging the fact that women are often seen as less politically connected. This intersection of gender and politics makes it even harder for female heads to enforce discipline.

#### *4.4 Institutional Neglect and the Gap Between Policy and Practice*

The lack of support from higher offices points to a critical institutional failure. While Zambia’s National Gender Policy mandates gender equity, it has not translated into effective support mechanisms for female leaders at the district level. District officers, themselves predominantly male, may share the same gender stereotypes as the community, leading to inaction when female heads report problems. This finding echoes Pont et al. (2008), who noted that school leaders, especially women, often lack the support they need to manage the complexities of their roles.

The “false promises” described by participants reveal a systemic issue: female heads are left to navigate conflicts alone, with no guarantee that their complaints will be acted upon. This not only undermines their authority but also increases their vulnerability. When a female head cannot rely on the district office to back her up, she may become reluctant to confront difficult staff, leading to a deterioration of school discipline.

#### *4.5 Political Intimidation: A Gendered Threat*

The political intimidation reported by some participants is a distinctive finding that deserves attention. In contexts where political parties exert influence over public appointments, female heads may be targeted as part of broader power struggles. However, the gendered nature of this intimidation is significant: women are more likely to be portrayed as

“disobedient” or “insubordinate” when they attempt to enforce rules, and their challenges to male authority can be framed as political opposition. This intertwining of gender and politics creates a unique vulnerability that has been underexplored in the literature on educational leadership. Comparative studies from the Global South reinforce this finding. Research on women’s leadership in Indian higher education institutions similarly documents how political networks, operating through informal patronage systems, create structural disadvantages for women who lack male sponsors or political affiliations (Mathew & Nair, 2022). In the Nepali context, Biswakarma (2024) found that female academic leaders were frequently excluded from decision-making through informal channels that bypassed formal governance structures, a dynamic closely mirroring the political intimidation reported in Kalabo. These parallels suggest that political interference in female leadership is not an aberration of specific local cultures but a manifestation of broader patriarchal governance systems that deserve sustained scholarly attention across Global South contexts.

#### *4.6 Dual Responsibilities and Psychological Cost*

The dual burden of work and family is a classic challenge for working women, but in the context of rural headship, it takes on added dimensions. Female heads often live apart from their families due to limited housing in remote areas, which adds to their isolation. Those who do live with their families face long hours that leave little time for domestic responsibilities. The psychological cost anxiety, stress, and occasional feelings of hopelessness was palpable in the interviews. This aligns with findings by Hoff and Mitchell (2008) that women in leadership often experience “role overload” and must constantly negotiate between competing demands.

#### *4.7 Coping Strategies: Agency and Resilience*

Despite these formidable challenges, the female head teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable agency and resilience. Their coping strategies delegation, professional development, community engagement, record keeping, and mentoring are not merely individual tactics but reflect a strategic approach to managing role incongruity. By delegating, they distribute authority, reducing the perception that they are “holding power” in a masculine way. By upgrading qualifications, they build objective legitimacy that counters subjective stereotypes. By engaging the community, they transform potential adversaries into allies. By keeping records, they arm themselves with evidence against those who would question their competence.

These strategies resonate with the concept of “feminine leadership” described by some scholars as more collaborative and relational (Shakeshaft, 1989). However, it is important to note that these women are not simply enacting a “feminine” style; they are deliberately

choosing strategies that work in their specific context. Their agency is constrained by structural barriers, but they exercise it to the fullest extent possible.

#### *4.8 Theoretical Contributions and Integration*

The findings provide strong support for role congruity theory. The prejudice and resistance female heads experience are directly attributable to the perceived mismatch between the feminine gender role and the leadership role. However, the study also extends the theory by highlighting how institutional and political factors interact with gender stereotypes. Role incongruity does not operate in a vacuum; it is activated and amplified by the lack of institutional support, the presence of political intimidation, and the physical isolation of rural schools. In other words, the gender gap in leadership is not just about individual attitudes but about the entire system within which women work.

Moreover, the study reveals that the “congruity” itself is dynamic. When female heads successfully build support networks, demonstrate competence, and engage the community, they can shift perceptions and create a new norm. The head teachers who reported positive experiences had, over time, achieved a degree of congruity their leadership was accepted because they had proven themselves. This suggests that role congruity is not fixed but can be negotiated through sustained performance and relationship-building.

#### *4.9 Implications for Policy and Practice*

The findings have several implications for policy makers and practitioners. First, there is an urgent need for gender sensitization programs targeting not only teachers but also community members, traditional leaders, and district officers. These programs should challenge stereotypes about women’s leadership and highlight the benefits of gender-diverse leadership teams. Second, district education offices must be held accountable for supporting female heads. This could include establishing a dedicated gender desk or assigning a female officer to serve as a mentor and advocate. Third, policies should be developed to protect female heads from political intimidation, with clear procedures for reporting and investigating threats.

Fourth, the Ministry should invest in infrastructure that reduces the dual burden on female heads, such as providing housing near schools, ensuring access to electricity and water, and considering family postings. Fifth, mentorship programs should be formalized, pairing new female heads with experienced female or male mentors who can provide guidance and support. Sixth, professional development opportunities like HEADLAMP should be expanded and made accessible to aspiring female teachers, creating a pipeline of qualified candidates.

#### *4.10 Limitations and Future Research*

This study is limited by its focus on a single district, which restricts generalizability. However, the depth of qualitative data provides rich insights that may be transferable to similar rural contexts. Future research could compare multiple districts with varying levels of gender policy implementation. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to track how female heads' experiences evolve over time and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of male teachers who resist female leadership could yield insights into how to address their resistance constructively.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study has illuminated the lived experiences of female head teachers in six primary schools in Kalabo District, Zambia. The findings reveal a duality: when supported by communities, staff, and district offices, women thrive in leadership, experiencing it as empowering and fulfilling. When unsupported, they confront a host of gender-based challenges: cultural rejection, male insubordination, institutional neglect, political intimidation, and the unrelenting dual burden of work and family. These challenges are not random but are rooted in the perceived incongruity between the feminine gender role and the leadership role an incongruity that is reinforced by deep-seated stereotypes and systemic failures.

Yet, the women in this study are not passive victims. They demonstrate remarkable agency through delegation, professional development, community engagement, and meticulous record-keeping. Their resilience challenges the very stereotypes that constrain them. The study contributes to the literature on gender and educational leadership by demonstrating how role congruity theory applies in a rural African context and by highlighting the intersection of gender with institutional and political dynamics.

To achieve genuine gender equity in school leadership, policies must move beyond aspirational statements to concrete actions: gender sensitization, institutional accountability, protection mechanisms, infrastructure improvements, and formal mentorship. The voices of female head teachers in Kalabo call for a transformation not only in who leads, but in how leadership is conceptualized and supported. As one head teacher poignantly concluded: Specifically, three priority actions are recommended. First, the Ministry of General Education should mandate the establishment of structured mentorship programs that pair newly appointed female head teachers with experienced mentors whether female or supportive male colleagues for a minimum of two years, with formal quarterly check-ins and documented progress reviews. Such formalized mentorship, as opposed to the ad hoc informal support currently described by participants, provides a sustained developmental foundation during the most vulnerable period of female headship.

Second, the District Education Board Secretaries (DEBS) across rural districts must undergo mandatory gender sensitization training, co-designed with female school leaders

and civil society organizations, to address the “institutional neglect” that renders formal gender policies ineffective at the district level. This training should include enforceable accountability measures, such as requiring DEBS offices to maintain transparent logs of complaints from female heads and the actions taken thereon, with oversight from the provincial education office. Third, the Ministry should establish a dedicated reporting and protection mechanism modeled on existing whistleblower frameworks for female heads experiencing political intimidation or staff misconduct, with guaranteed response timelines and non-retaliation guarantees, so that women can enforce professional standards without fear of politically motivated retaliation.

*"We can lead just as well as men. All we need is a chance and support. When we are given that, the school benefits, the children benefit, and the community sees that a woman can do it."*

## REFERENCES

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Celikten, M. (2005). A perspective on women principals in Turkey. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 8(3), 207–221.
- Chonya, F. M. (2006). *A comparative study of effectiveness of female school head teachers with their male counterparts: A case of Lusaka Province* [Unpublished master's dissertation]. University of Zambia.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598.
- Hoff, D. L., & Mitchell, S. N. (2008). In search of leaders: Gender factors in school administration. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 27(2), 1–12.
- Karuiki, P. W. (2007). *Challenges faced by female head teachers in the management of public secondary schools in Gatundu District, Kenya* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Kenyatta University.
- Mahlase, S. (1997). *The position and experiences of black women teachers*. University of Natal Press.

- Ministry of General Education [MoGE]. (2014). *National Gender Policy*. Government of the Republic of Zambia.
- Muchelemba, V. (2001). *Management effectiveness of female and male public secondary schools head teachers in Lusaka district* [Unpublished master's dissertation]. University of Zambia.
- Odejide, A. (2007). Women in leadership in Nigerian universities: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, 5(2–3), 113–129.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2018). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41–60). Springer.
- Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H. (2008). *Improving school leadership, Volume 1: Policy and practice*. OECD Publishing.
- Shakeshaft, C. (1989). *Women in educational administration*. Sage Publications.
- UNESCO. (2022). *Global education monitoring report: Gender report*. UNESCO.
- Biswakarma, R. (2024). Women in academic leadership in Nepal: Navigating informal exclusion and governance structures. *Scholars' Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 45–58.
- Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists*. Sage Publications.
- Mathew, A., & Nair, M. (2022). Status of women leadership in Indian higher education: Barriers, strategies, and pathways. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 37(3), 662–678.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.