



Breaking Barriers: Examining the Participation of Female Students in the Student Representative Council at a Public University in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *Gender parity in leadership, including student governance structures at institutions of higher learning, remains a challenge globally, especially in Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular. This study examines factors influencing the representation of female students in the Student Representative Council (SRC) at a public university in Zimbabwe. A survey design was employed and semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive statistics and thematic analyses were used to analyse data. Less than half of the respondents opined that women are adequately represented in the SRC. They pointed out some of the inhibiting factors such as lack of confidence and financial resources. Interviews identified socio-cultural challenges such as negative societal perceptions leading to backlash against female candidates. Recommendations include gender sensitisation programs, targeted leadership training, implementation of representation quotas, and advocacy on transforming patriarchal societal attitudes. Overall, addressing multifaceted constraints can promote the realisation of women's full leadership capabilities at the institutional level.*

Keywords: *Gender discrimination, Gender sensitisation, Quota, Advocacy, Student governance, Patriarchy, Equitable, Inclusive*

How to cite this work (APA):

Mupupuni, G., Kunakahakudyiwi, C., Munesi, V. & Muchenga, A. (2024). Breaking Barriers: Examining the Participation of Female Students in the Student Representative Council at a Public University in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 8(3), 21 – 34. <https://doi.org/10.59765/sbgu5723>.

1. Introduction

The pervasive under-representation of female students in the student representative councils has been a global challenge particularly in African universities such as the University of Zimbabwe (Nsele 2013; Mpofu 2017; Gaidzanwa 1992). This under-representation is noticeable in the student representative council (SRC) and presidential elections. Despite explicit condemnations of sexist discrimination, this issue persists, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to promote gender equality

in student leadership. Including female leaders in student governance is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. Women's participation ensures diverse perspectives in decision-making processes, which can lead to more comprehensive and effective policies that benefit the entire student body (Mpofu 2017; Rana 2022). It also challenges and helps dismantle existing gender stereotypes, promoting gender equality and empowering female students to take on leadership roles.

A research study by Gaidzamwa (1992:10) noted that in the last 70 years, the University of Zimbabwe, registrar's post has primarily been a preserve for males. Of the current 8

Dean posts at the University of Zimbabwe, only two are female. Other research conducted by Gaidzamwa in 1992 reveals that only 12.0% of senior public positions in Zimbabwe were held by women. Feminists feel it is high time that females resist these stereotypes (Asnani 2020; Martinez 2022; Anderson 2016). In Zimbabwe, recent government reports indicate a positive shift with increasing female enrolment in universities. Despite these advancements, female students remain marginalised in SRC decision-making, occupying peripheral roles with limited decision-making capacity.

To address gender inclusivity concerns, the Zimbabwean government crafted the National Gender Policy in March 2004. The goal was "to eliminate all negative economic, social and political policies, cultural and religious practices that impede equality and equity of sexes" (National Gender Policy 2004:3). One of the objectives of the policy is "to promote equal opportunities for women and men in decision making in all areas and all levels" (National Gender Policy 2004:3). To buttress the above policy, the Public Service Commission published a circular referenced G/46/200 dated 30 April 2004. This was circulated to all government ministries requesting input as to how best gender balance could be attained in their respective ministries. Regrettably, most of these policies have just been rhetoric without tangible implementation (Mpofu 2017). The National Gender Policy of 2004 and subsequent circulars signal the government's commitment to gender balance. However, translating policy into a tangible impact on female representation within student governance structures still needs to be implemented.

Given this background to female marginalisation, Zimbabwe has tried to improve the plight of women. Mukeredzi's (2022) recent government report notes that enrolment in Zimbabwe's universities and teacher training colleges has favoured female students in the past two to three years. The *Education Statistics Report 2018-20*, released by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency in December 2021, states that 50699 female students were recruited in universities in 2018 compared with 43 432 males. The same report shows that 60149 women enrolled in 2019 in comparison to 51 535 men. In addition, the report reveals that in 2020, the numbers were 62 629 and 53 699, respectively. The enrolment statistics mentioned above warrant that female students ought to haggle for critical leadership roles, yet they have been and continue to be under-represented in the SRC decision-making board within universities. The 2023 SRC election at the University of Zimbabwe, however, marked a pivotal moment due to the proactive involvement of pressure groups spearheading substantial progress in advancing gender inclusivity. A significant measure was enacted, stipulating that a minimum of one of every three Student

Representative Assembly, candidates had to be female. Furthermore, introducing a quarter system guaranteed the inclusion of three female candidates in the Student Representative Council. Mukeredzi (2022) has however noted that female students are still inactive in mainstream student governance. Most females are confined to being praise singers and ardent Student Representative Council supporters.

1.1 Justification of the study

This study finds justification in the University of Zimbabwe's goals of fostering inclusivity and gender equality. Its aim was to challenge stereotypes and redefine the narrative around female leadership in university student representative councils (SRCs). By promoting an environment where all students, regardless of gender, can contribute meaningfully to student governance, this research sought to inspire positive changes towards more equitable and inclusive leadership frameworks. By exploring the unique challenges and opportunities faced by female university students, it provides valuable insights into addressing gender disparities in higher education (Nsele 2013; Mpofu 2017; Rana 2022).

This study further contributes to the broader national agenda of achieving educational equity. Women empowerment aligns with global goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasise the importance of women's full and effective participation in leadership at all levels (UNICEF 2022). There is a notable scarcity of studies explicitly focusing on the experiences of educated women in academic settings. While many studies have addressed gender issues in various domains, few have examined the intersectionality of educational pursuits and the challenges faced by educated female students. This research aims to fill this void, offering a nuanced understanding of educated women's experiences within the SRC leadership context. The relevance of this study lies in its potential to empower and amplify the voices of educated women in Student Representative Council leadership settings. As societies work to dismantle patriarchal structures, understanding the unique experiences of educated women becomes crucial (Jain 2020; UNESCO 2022; Rana 2022). The findings of this research can inform university policies and contribute to national and global conversations.

1.2 Research Questions

The questions guiding this research paper are:

1. What is the ideal image of a capable female presidential candidate for the Student Representative Council (SRC)?
2. Which factors inhibit the participation of female students in student governance?
3. How can female university students be empowered to articulate their views confidently and effectively to participate in the apex of the student governance board?

2. Literature Review

The literature germane to this study explores the historical struggles of women who, for eons, were relegated to invisible roles in a predominantly masculine world. Having realised that women are seemingly invisible in the masculine world and their roles are trivialised, feminist activists organised themselves around the 1820s so they could articulate their concerns about being side-lined in governance. The literature reviewed is therefore rooted in feminist principles advocating against women's enduring economic, social, and political marginalisation. Despite global strides towards gender equality, challenges still persist. The inclusivity gap is so significant that it was not until 2005 that women in Kuwait were granted the right to vote and stand for election. Women in Saudi Arabia still grapple with restricted political freedoms. Sadly, as of this writing, women in Saudi Arabia do not yet have those political freedoms (Hodges, 2017; Haya, Ayub, & Adeinat (2023). The challenges of accessing women leaders in Saudi Arabia have been widely documented (Hodges 2017; Rana 2022).

The worrisome trend in most universities in Zimbabwe reflects male students' dominance. At one private university in Zimbabwe, Africa University, the 2023/2024 SRC was dominated by males, with a male student being the president. The university's outgoing SRC was also male dominated with only one female. A similar pattern was evident at one of the state universities, the National University of Science and Technology (NUST). The NUST SRC of 2022/2023 comprised 11 males and 4 females with the president being male. However, another large state university, Midlands State University, alongside Women's University in Africa, were two of the few universities boasting a high representation of women in SRC, but most of these females played peripheral roles. Rarely do female students occupy imposing positions such as the president of the SRC. Abiona Mataranyika (21) made history by becoming the first female president of the Students Representative Council (SRC) at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). This was after her election early in November 2019. A news reporter, Mataranyika, reported that UZ got the first female SRC president after 67 years. It was the first time a female led the UZ students' body

since it opened its doors almost 70 years back. Although Abiona Mataranyika thought she had blazed a trail and opened space for more young women to take up leadership roles, no other female candidate at the University of Zimbabwe has made it to this prestigious post since then.

In neighbouring South Africa, a study on student governance structures unveiled enduring patriarchal structures similar to the Zimbabwean society, where women remain a minority in leadership positions (Bhana 2021). Another research study by Nsele (2013) tried to determine the factors that hindered female students from attaining leadership positions in the Student Representative Council conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The target population was 16 female leaders who served in the University's Student Representative Council from 2019 to 2020, of which 13 responded. The researcher discovered that, among other things, the vanguard political movements lacked policies concerning gender transformation. Findings further revealed that the Student Representative Council structure at the university was patriarchal, with little commitment to gender equality. Generally, males outnumbered women in leadership roles. In most cases, the portfolios assigned to women were mainly administrative rather than leadership. the same trend prevails. However, the story is different for Rhodes University. Rhodes University Student Representative Council (SRC) was dominated by women. In the 110th SRC Council election ceremony, which took place on Friday, October 09, 2020, 14 out of 16 SRC Councillors were women, and the president was female.

In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's accelerated reforms are reportedly creating new opportunities for women's leadership. However, these are not yet reflected in the higher education sector. The findings revealed that the barriers to women's leadership were most significant within the partially segregated universities, rendering women leaders effectively powerless. All other universities are led by male presidents, while there are 12 women Vice Presidents (Alotaibi 2020).

Globally, parallels are drawn with the United States, where a mere 40% of student presidents in universities and colleges are female, even in institutions with predominantly female student populations. According to *The Washington Post* (March 16 2011), the American Student Government Association cites that, nationwide, only 40% of student presidents in their universities and colleges were females. Supporting this view, a senior official of Whitman College reported in a blog (Vanderbilt 2011) that their college population was 60% women, but the student government's senate was 81% male. Of the senators, only three were female, while thirteen were male. Akbar & Al-Dajani (2023) found that the women

participating in student governance processes were not in presidential positions. Akbar & Al-Dajani (2023) and Miles (2010) maintain that over 70% of the student government presidents and vice presidents were male. In their study of 21 mid-western universities in the United States, there were no women in the roles of president or vice president in student government.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This research study adopted the principles of liberal feminism, influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's advocacy for equal opportunities in the late 18th century. Feminism's basic mantra is the creation of a just society, the protection of freedom and liberty, and the creation of a gender-neutral society. The feminist critiques of stereotypical gender roles are echoed in the works of (Enyew & Mihrete 2018), who contend that the experience of women in society is distinct from that of men, with women facing oppression across various societal strata. Liberalism advocates for the rule of law, civil and human rights, secularism, democracy, freedom of speech, press, and religion and encourages the development of political and economic freedoms to women (Alterman 2008; Jan 2020; Mpofu 2017). The liberal feminist viewpoint is further reinforced by the insights of (Asnani 2020; Martinez 2022; Anderson 2016), who concur that women, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, are triply oppressed – facing racial, gender, and patriarchal oppression. The three scholars challenge humanity not to think of women as having a homogenous identity but to view them as people of multiple identities and capable leaders. Additionally, liberal feminists concur that, “Women are triply oppressed, first as blacks in a white society, secondly as women in a white society and as women under patriarchy then as women under capitalism” (Stratton 1990; Enyew & Mihrete 2018). Liberal feminism questions why men are judged on their merits while women's abilities are judged based on their sex. Furthermore, within the context of African American feminism, the intersectionality of oppression experienced by Black women is acknowledged. The struggles young Black girls face in SRC leadership environments, as articulated by Nsele (2013), Ribeiro (2016), Mpofu (2017) and Jain (2020) who emphasise the intersectionality of race and gender, highlight the need for a multifaceted feminist approach. The tendency to regulate female involvement and lower their representation in SRC leadership roles is an extension of these intersecting oppressions (Nsele 2013). These liberal feminist tenets provide a robust foundation for understanding and addressing the under-representation of female students in SRC and the need to promote inclusivity (Raj & Davidson, 2014). There currently seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel through the emerging SRCs, now consisting of younger women.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This study utilised a mixed methods research approach to address its objectives. A convergent parallel approach was employed to collect quantitative and qualitative data concurrently on the experiences of female students seeking leadership roles in the SRC. The target population was undergraduate students who enrolled to begin studies at the University of Zimbabwe in the years 2018-2022. For quantitative data, a survey was conducted with a sample of 50 students stratified across faculties and levels of study. For qualitative data, purposive sampling was used to select 11 post and current female SRC candidates for in-depth interviews. Primary data was collected between July and September 2023. A paper-based survey with closed and open-ended questions was distributed to 50 randomly selected students to assess perceptions of female candidates and participation barriers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 11 female SRC candidates to explore their experiences running for leadership roles. Media reports on SRC elections between 2018-2022 were analysed to evaluate the representation of female candidates. Survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS to generate graphs and frequency tables of respondents' responses. Themes around stereotypes, challenges, and empowerment strategies were identified from the responses. Qualitative and quantitative findings were then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding. Multiple data collection methods were used for triangulation.

3.2 Sampling and sample

To address the objectives of the study, the researchers created a database of 50 males and females, aspiring, current and former students in SRC leadership positions in University of Zimbabwe. These were accessed on the publicly available profiles on the websites of the university and random sampling. The attempt to secure a randomised sample of female leaders was difficult due to the high rate of participation refusals and general prejudice. We resorted to convenience sampling, and continued data collection until data saturation was reached where we enlisted 50 male and female leaders from the university's SRC structures. According to Gliner and Morgan (2009: 144), sampling “...is the process of selecting part of the large group of participants with the intention of generalising from the smaller group called the sample, to the population, the larger group.” The purposive sampling, also referred to as the judgement sampling, is the sampling technique where the researcher chooses the participants based on the predetermined criteria. Male SRC members were also as

per the research plan going to be among the participants to ascertain their political views on gender transformation.

3.3 Data collection methods

We adopted a responsive interviewing method and quantitative data analysis in the form of a questionnaire to capture the participants' own meaning of their experiences. The focus group interviews entailed a conversational partnership with the interviewees to understand their individual experiences through their own words (Rubin & Rubin 2012). The interview guides were carefully developed and refined from dialogical discussions within the research team to reflect the research aims of the study and the theorisation guiding the study. This process continued through the initial phase of interviews as our understanding was enriched through the conversations of the group interviews. Such interviews are particularly recommended for small-scale qualitative research. Interviews provided flexibility in collecting in-depth data about the participants' experiences and perceptions (Rubin & Rubin 2012). Interviews with members of the research team lasted for 30 minutes on average. The presence of two research team members facilitated note taking and recording of observations and verification of data analysis. The interview and questionnaire responses were recorded following the participant's consent and later transcribed thematically. To ensure validity, the questionnaire items were examined by an education professor to ensure clarity and usability and to make sure that items are free from ambiguity and technical or sentence structural issues. Before collection of data, the researcher carried out a pilot study with 10 participants with similar characteristics as those in the main sample. The pilot study test yielded a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.715.

3.4 Data analysis

After gathering, data was cleaned then uploaded into SPSS. The data cleaning process included the extracting duplicate, extraneous information, discarding incomplete questionnaires and validating outliers in the data. SPSS was utilised to find means and standard deviations before analysing the scientific data. By exploring gender experiences through mixed modalities, the study aimed to propose strategies for universities to effectively champion inclusivity and equity in SRC student governance. The NVIVO application was employed to classify raw data into themes. These themes were later analysed in detail.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research were adhered to. This was done by transparently delineating the research purpose, how the data would be used, the benefits from the research, and measures to anonymise and protect the data as well as to conceal the identities of participants in the publication. Anonymity and informed consent ensured confidentiality. Reflectivity addressed potential biases of researchers. The initial part of the interview was dedicated to building the participants' trust and confidence in the researchers and their intentions. The interview guide covered the participants' backgrounds and characteristics, household characteristics, perception of gender-related issues, leadership experiences in SRC and elsewhere, organisational context, and reflections on their leadership experiences and advice for women in academia. Member checks and thick descriptions of data bolstered credibility and transferability of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

Respondents' gender

The study targeted both male and female university students. Female respondents were 65% and males were 35%. Males were incorporated to capture balanced sentiments on gender inclusivity. *Students' perceptions of female SRC candidates*

Table 1: How female SRC candidates are portrayed

<u>Perception</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage (%)</u>
Negatively	24	47
Positively	13	26
The same as men	13	26
N = 50		

The study results reflect that those with negative views were 47% while those who hold positive perceptions were 26% and those who think they were the same as their male counterparts were 26%. Most respondents had negative perceptions of female leadership capabilities, indicating substantial societal biases that may hinder female participation in SRC roles.

Do you feel that female students are adequately represented in the SRC council?

The study sought to establish whether there is adequate representation of female in the SRC. A small proportion of

participants (40%) reported that there was adequate representation. Whereas the majority (60%) indicated that the women were not adequately represented in the SRC. A significant majority believed women were inadequately represented in the SRC, emphasising the need for structural changes to support female candidates. Zimbabwean universities are characterised by a majority of private co-educational universities and one previously, women-only university, which has recently opened its doors to males.

What are some of the challenges hindering female student participation within the SRC?

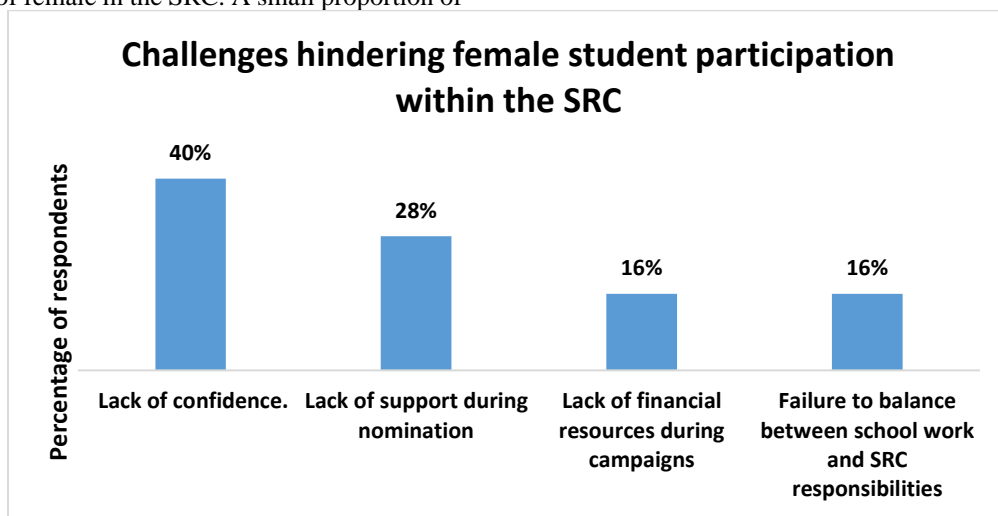


Figure 1: Challenges hindering female student participation within the SRC (N = 50)

The study results in Figure 1 show that just below half of the participants (40%) reported that lack of confidence posed as a challenge, while slightly above a quarter (28%) mentioned lack of support. Just below a fifth of the participants (16%) reported that lack of financial resources during campaigns, and a similar percentage (16%) also stated that failure to balance between schoolwork and SRC responsibilities were challenges hindering the participation of female students in the SRC. The predominant challenge was the lack of confidence among female students, suggesting that empowerment programs could be critical in overcoming this barrier. Women from different SRC cohorts shared the view that women leaders faced stereotypical attitudes and behaviours in academic institutions. The women-only university was led by a female SRC president. All other universities were led by male SRC presidents while women took on peripheral roles like secretaries and representatives for the Disability Department. This was an anomaly given the emblems of Vision 2030 promoting women empowerment. It was also a paradox that Zimbabwe's higher education sector continued to resist a gender-inclusive leadership reflecting the gendered dynamics and trends in the general and among student populations.

Have you ever applied to become an SRC president?

None of the respondents indicated that they had ever applied to become the president of the SRC. Despite this seemingly lack of interest in leadership, the future for women's leadership in Zimbabwe looks promising. The country is undergoing profound changes, especially with Zimbabwe's 2030 policy, which seeks to transform the country into a vibrant society. The policy has been accompanied by unprecedented liberalisation for Zimbabwean women in the SRC. In a decree enacted by the University of Zimbabwe in 2023 SRC, it became mandatory for women to hold at least a quota of posts in the SRC committee. The recommendation played an important role in enabling women to participate in SRC governance. However, the proposal is yet to be officially documented in the Ordinance 30, which is the guiding document. Currently, Ordinance 30 is still thin on women empowerment details rendering it baseless and theoretically weak. By and large, the issues surrounding women marginalisation in Zimbabwe are still under-researched (Mpofu 2017). Some studies still need to be

conducted on the barriers and opportunities for women's leadership.

How does media visually portray, caption, photograph or use language to describe female students in the SRC?

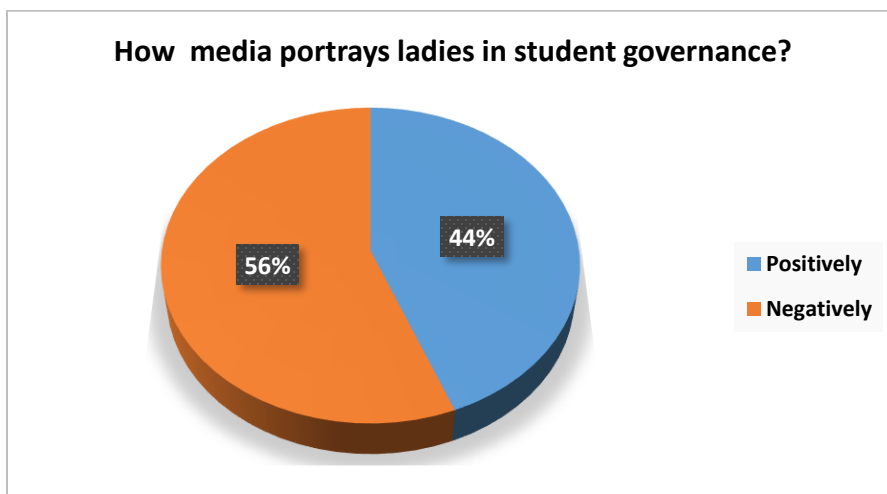


Figure 2: How media portrays female students in governance (N = 50)

The pie chart above depicts respondents' perception of how the media portrays female students in the SRC. Slightly below half (43.8%) reiterated that the media portrayed female leaders positively, and 56.3% stated that it portrayed them negatively. A majority perceived the media representation as negative, which may exacerbate challenges faced by female candidates and perpetuate stereotypes about female leadership. A study by Akbar, Al-Dajani and Adeinat (2023) established that men sometimes underestimate women or question their capability. Culturally, some men question why a woman is trying to do things on her own without male assistance. At times women refuse leadership positions because the added responsibilities disturb their expected domestic roles.

Additional information given by the respondents to the same question included the following:

Women are portrayed as incapable of leading.

It has been normalized that the SRC should be made up of mostly males.

It appears females are not interested in SRC positions which they feel are for men.

Ladies lack confidence, women are believed to be poor leaders.

Comment on the news feeds, with regards to women on social media during and after the election period

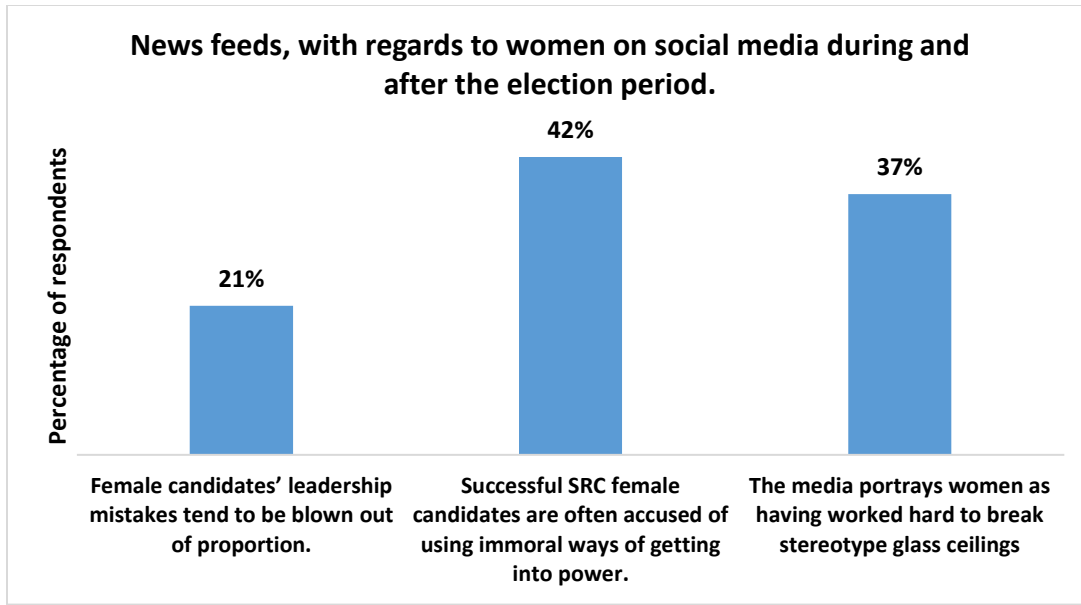


Figure 3: Comments from social media (N = 50)

The study results show that 42% of the respondents reported that successful SRC female candidates were often accused of using immoral ways of getting into power. Some 37% of the respondents pointed out that the media portrayed women as having worked hard to break stereotype glass ceilings. The glass ceilings were considered as unbreakable (Ribeiro 2016). The behaviour of both women and men are generally shaped by the institutional practices and norms and stereotypical attitudes and behaviours, thereby posing challenges for women in SRC leadership positions (Mohajan 2022). Women's leadership potential is facilitated or constrained in these dynamic settings.

Do you think the SRC election process is transparent and fair?

The interview question asked the respondents' view whether the elections were fair. Those who said "Yes"

were 70%, but 30% said, "No". While most believed the election process was fair, the 30% dissenting opinion highlights concerns over the treatment of female candidates. This suggests a need for reforms to ensure gender equity. All the respondents were given an opportunity to highlight why they felt the election was fair/unfair and the various reasons were given. Female candidates felt they were labelled negatively and lacked support. They proposed that a quota system should be introduced so that females compete favourably.

Adjectives that best describes female candidates' presentation in the public eye during campaigns

Pursuant to election fairness discussed earlier, we further analysed the adjectives used to describe female students' participants in the SRC. The results are shown in Figure 4.

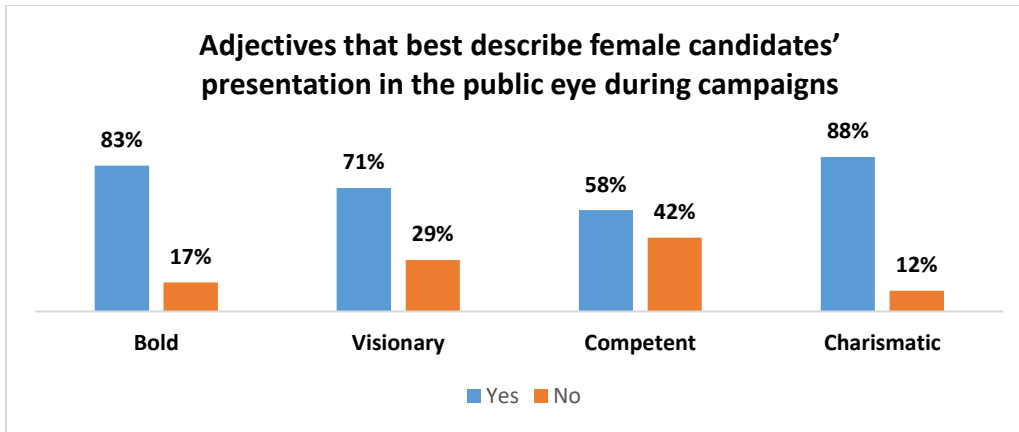


Figure 4: Descriptions of female candidates in the public eye during campaigns (N = 50)

The majority of the respondents (83.3%) described female candidates as bold visionaries in the public eye during the campaigns. In addition, many (71%) reported that they were seen as visionaries, and above half of the participants (58%) saw them as competent. Those who see them as charismatic were 88% of the respondents. Respondents also perceived female candidates as generally bold and

charismatic, indicating a recognition of positive traits that could inspire confidence in their leadership potential.

In your perception, what is the ideal image of a capable female SRC leader?

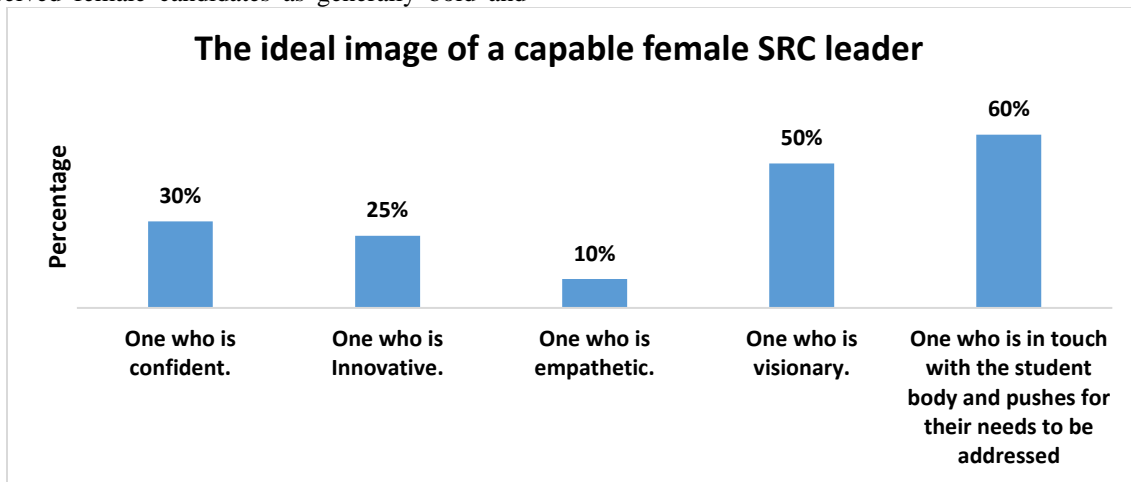


Figure 5: Perception of the ideal image of a capable female SRC leader (N = 50)

The graph above shows the various views from the respondents on the ideal image of a capable female SRC leader. More than a quarter of participants (30%) mentioned that she should be confident, while a quarter (25%) pointed out that she should be innovative. A paltry number (10%) stated that one ought to be empathetic. Half of the participants (50%) reported that a female SRC leader should be a visionary. A larger proportion of participants (60%) reported that she should be in touch with the student body and ought to push for their needs to be addressed. The ideal female leader was perceived as someone who in touch

with the student body and a visionary, highlighting the importance of understanding student needs and driving a clear vision.

Do you feel that the aspiring female leaders possess the above-mentioned qualities?

The analysis of the qualities of the aspiring students revealed the following characteristics as illustrated in Figure 6.

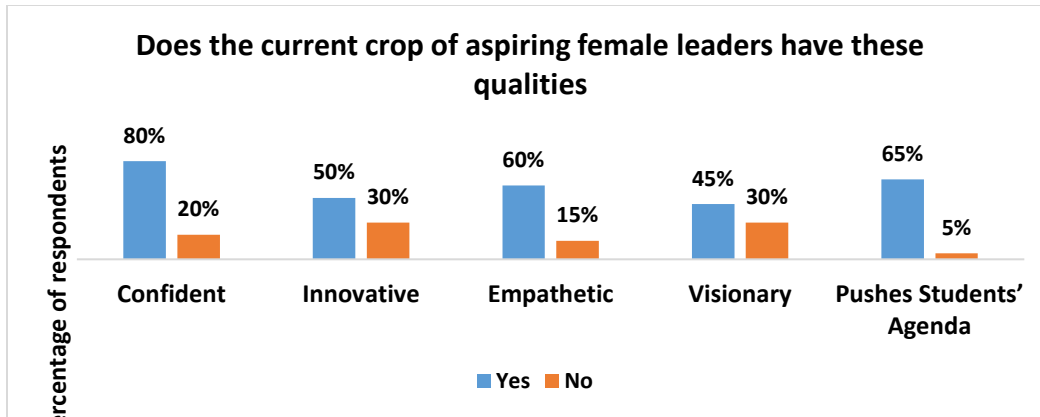


Figure 6: Qualities of the aspiring students (N = 50)

The study results are shown in the graph above. Those who reported that female aspiring leaders are confident were 80% of the respondents. Other results showed that, *innovative* (62.5%), *empathetic* (80%), *visionary* (60%) and *pushes students' agenda* (92.9%). A high percentage of respondents believe that current aspiring female leaders

possessed desirable qualities, indicating a positive outlook on their capabilities.

How can universities develop leadership qualities in potential female SRC candidates?

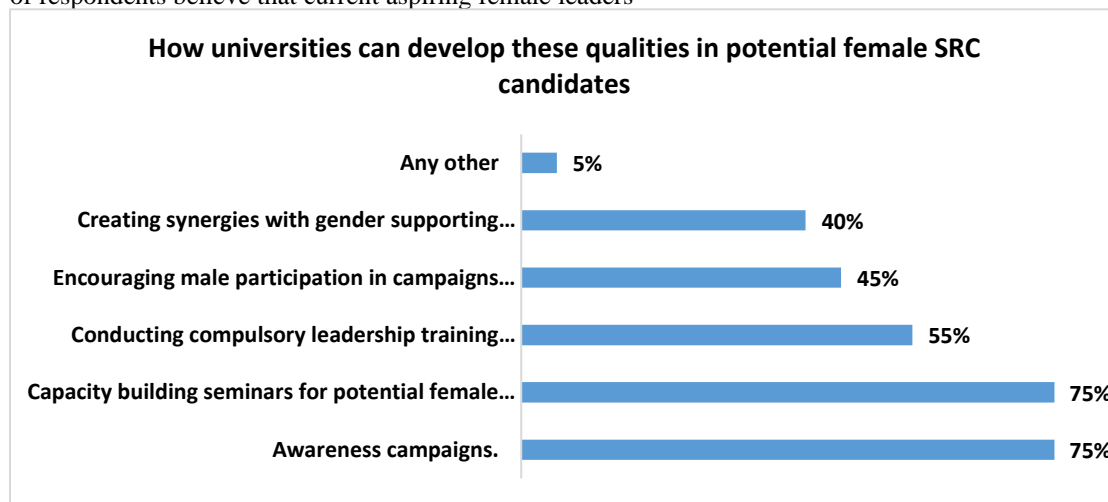


Figure 7: How universities could develop leadership qualities in potential female SRC candidates (N = 50)

Figure 7 above shows the different suggestions on how universities could develop the qualities of potential female SRC candidates. Awareness campaigns (75%) were reported to be the most effective ways of garnering support, and capacity building seminars were rated at 60%. Leadership training courses had 55%, and encouraging male participation had 45%. Synergies with supporting institutions had 40%. The consensus on awareness campaigns and capacity-building seminars affirms these as essential strategies for fostering female leadership, indicating a clear path forward for universities.

Themes Emerging from Qualitative Data

Prejudice

The findings from in-depth interviews and participant observations shed light on the pervasive challenges faced by female candidates in the matriarchal political system. A recurring theme was the backlash experienced by young women, highlighting the inherent disadvantages associated with their gender. The participants were asked the question: 'How do the students respond to your application for the presidency?' Some 35 female participants expressed booing as a common reaction, thus affirming the existence of societal stereotypical gender roles as echoed in the works of (Enyew & Mihrete 2018). The female respondents also admitted that limited experience and poor support from the student body negatively impacted their campaigns. Three female students expressed that their prospective roles as mothers inhibited ambition and the drive into leadership positions. There is an immediate

necessity to establish mechanisms that challenge and transform the entrenched patriarchal ideologies surrounding women (Nsele 2013; Mpofu 2017).

Lax of policy implementation

Another concerning discovery pertained to the proclamation of policies without subsequent implementation. According to Nsele (2013), and Mpofu (2017), a comprehensive policy should encompass a statement of intent, well-defined objectives, a projected execution strategy, a timeframe, and a monitoring and evaluation plan. However, the policy document of Nziramasanga and the National Gender Policy lacked these essential characteristics.

Lack of equipping for leadership role

A crucial point arising from discussions revolved around the need to enhance women's leadership capabilities. Interview participants acknowledged the insufficient efforts by the University of Zimbabwe in equipping women with leadership skills. Thematic analysis further highlighted limited prior political experience (85%) and poor institutional support structures as hindrances. Content analysis of media reports (N=50) from 2018-2022 revealed stereotypical portrayals potentially exacerbated participation barriers. Additionally, the university's leadership structures lacked gender balance, favouring males with a ratio of 6:3, indicating a lack of commitment to inclusivity. Mohajan (2022) recommends a strategic commitment to empower women with leadership skills to reduce male dominance in student politics and transform the gender status quo within SRC culture. Government policies should extend to SRCs, guiding policymakers and influencing institutional policies. The absence of prior research on gender inclusivity in SRC structures at the University of Zimbabwe underscores the deficiency in commitment to implementation strategies.

Among twelve interviewed females, two (15%) possessed significant political experience, with one engaging in political activities since high school. This participant demonstrated political ambition and a deep understanding of the challenges faced by female SRC candidates. The remaining eight (85%) lacked extensive political experience, and a majority did not participate in SRC races, viewing student activism as a futile endeavour. Female participants generally exhibited humility in their articulations and hesitated to identify as "student politicians". In contrast, male participants displayed a broader experience in student governance, showcasing superior student governance acumen.

More than half (60%) of the female respondents believed the gender status quo was unalterable. Some participants expressed the belief that male political dominance is an inherent and unchangeable phenomenon. Participant G's perspective aligned with this belief, contending that gender transformation advocacy may, at best, achieve descriptive representation, which, while crucial, falls short of adequately improving the status of women. This participant cited the Bible as a governing reference, dismissing gender transformation as inconsistent with the principles outlined in the Bible and foundation to the Christian religion. Such a viewpoint perceives male dominance as a natural and legitimate way of life, resisting any paradigm shift and addressing the implication that such discipline is exclusive to women.

Gender stereotyping

Another significant barrier identified was the prevalence of societal expectations that perpetuate gender stereotypes. When commenting on student governance, male students were usually quoted as legislators and elected student leaders. The perception that women must resort to compromising relationships for political gains further marginalises female candidates. The data exposes the disturbing notion that women may be perceived as advancing not based on merit, but through relationships with influential men within SRC structures. Moreover, the interviews uncovered deeply entrenched gender biases that impede women's political roles. The assumption that women "sell their bodies" for political gain undermines their credibility and agency. Such allegations about sexual liaisons or favours create the perception that the women appointed to fill the quota are simply patriarchal pawns. The downside of these calculated sexual favours is that they could backfire. This is because the culprit would not be able to contribute in the SRC Council. The female candidate would be controlled as males tend to view such females as mere sex objects and not to being taken seriously. The data reflects the frustration of young females who feel controlled and constrained by SRC structures, hindering their ability to voice concerns and contribute meaningfully to political discourse. Interviewed females manifested low self-esteem and a lack of self-assertiveness.

Constantly, aspiring female presidential candidates were subjected to threats, intimidation tactics, accused of having loose morals, public shaming, and being labelled incompetent for political office (Mpofu 2017). This hindered female representation in the student representative council elections. Hence, there is a need to better equip female students concerning traditions of political organising and transformation, which could help them better realise their agency within the current political order.

Despite major advances by key feminists, there are still therefore some troubling gender gaps in society. A lot needs to be done to enhance the identities of women. Mukeredzi (2022) highlights the need by modern society, to change its patriarchal construct of the woman. It is therefore hoped that this current research contributes to wider efforts to connect the academic syllabus design to political practice outside of the university.

Discussion

Despite the progress made in tertiary institutions, the participation of women in higher education leadership remains limited (Nsele 2013; Abalkhail & Allan 2015; Mpofo 2017). It appears women's leadership could thrive and flourish if the widely accepted marginalisation are dealt with. The small steps taken so far in accommodating females in SRC positions gives a glimmer of hope for a more equitable platform in future. The current findings demonstrate that gender segregation disempowers women leaders (Akbar & Al-Dajan 2023). In co-educational universities, gender inequalities were reproduced through embedded structural domination (Abalkhail & Allan 2015; Statista 2020).

The participant female students seemed to require conscientisation to catch up with the social reforms and transformations that have already reshaped the country's other sectors. Women appear to be inhibited by the deep rooted and inflexible beliefs and traditions that require a huge assignment to challenge gender inequality. Addressing the root cause of gender stereotyping demands a comprehensive approach. Initiatives should not only focus on promoting equal opportunities but also challenge engrained societal perceptions that hinder the full realisation of women's leadership potential. By fostering a culture that dismantles gender stereotypes and empowers women to overcome self-imposed limitations, institutions can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable student governance. Zimbabwean universities should strive to adopt other feminist approaches combined with liberal feminist strategies to influence high-speed and remarkable change in attitudes and perceptions so that gender equality can be attained.

Zimbabwean universities are aligned to Vision 2030 strategy that emphasises unlocking the talent, potential, and economic participation of women. Although women's literacy rate is currently at 93% (World Bank 2020), and in most universities women graduates outnumber their male counterparts (Statista 2020), women still comprise only 22.26% of the workforce. This scenario shows the extend and negative impact of the hegemonic stereotypes. The Prevailing stereotypical prejudices tend to limit women's leadership capabilities. Short of societal attitude change,

there is little that women leaders can do to stop marginalization in universities.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

More work still needs to be done towards qualitative and quantitative changes increasing female student in SRC governance. Although governments and many stakeholders encourage the subject of gender equality, efforts in most parts of the world, especially in Zimbabwe, to alleviate women's oppression and subordination are countered by negative attitudes. Findings indicate that definite actions to change the situation have been taken by governmental and non-governmental organisations, women activists, associations and feminist movements. However, the focus is mainly on the public spheres rather than the private spheres such as individual domestic settings. In the current study, gender stereotyping was shown to be the major cause of underrepresentation of females in student governance.

5.2 Recommendations

Promoting gender equality education in institutions requires:

Quota systems: Establishing and implementing gender quotas is a proactive measure to address the underrepresentation of females in student governance. These quotas should set specific targets for female participation, encouraging a more balanced and equitable representation. Regular assessments and reporting on the progress of gender quotas would hold institutions accountable for their commitment to fostering inclusivity. Administrators should proactively pave the way for a more equitable and representative student leadership landscape.

Comprehensive advocacy campaigns: Launching targeted advocacy initiatives and campaigns that emphasise the importance of diverse representation and challenge existing biases. Launch targeted advocacy campaigns that emphasise the importance of diverse representation in student governance. Collaborate with student groups, organisations, and influencers to amplify the message of gender equality.

Conducting training programs and sensitisation sessions: These should be earmarked for students, faculty, and administrators to instil a deeper understanding of the benefits of gender diversity. This proactive approach aims to create a supportive environment for the successful implementation of quotas.

Establish robust enforcement mechanisms to monitor and ensure compliance with gender quotas: These enhanced recommendations collectively address the multifaceted challenges hindering female participation in student governance. By fostering a culture of gender equality through education, implementing clear and measurable quotas, and advocating for inclusive practices, institutions can.

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