

Experiences of Female School Principals on Resilient Leadership Practices in Leading and Managing Rural Schools

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Abstract	Article Info
<p>While there is a growing body of literature on educational leadership, gender and leadership, and rural schooling challenges in South Africa, there remains a notable lack of in-depth, context-specific research focusing on resilient leadership practices of female school principals. Female school principals have to deal with unfair gendered expectations from different stakeholders when performing their leadership responsibilities. The paper aimed to investigate how female principals in rural schools practice resilient leadership in the face of gender-based challenges owing to their identity as females. Grounded in social role theory, which posits that individuals' behaviours and responsibilities are shaped by societal expectations associated with their gender. Underpinned by the qualitative and interpretive paradigm, this paper used phenomenology as a research design, centered around female school principals' lived experiences. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with three participants and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that communities are enablers of gendered expectations from female school principals; female school principals end up possessing elevated levels of emotional intelligence, competence, and confidence compared to their male counterparts, and lastly, demonstrating sustained perseverance and resolute</p>	<p><b>Article History:</b> <b>Received:</b> March 5, 2025 <b>Accepted:</b> August 21, 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> educational leadership, female leadership, gender, resilience, rural schools, social role theory.</p>

*determination facilitated their success in leadership positions. The paper recommends community engagement, policy changes, and capacity-building programs to sensitize communities to undoing entrenched gender prejudices in educational leadership.*

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**Cite as:**

Nhlumayo, B. S. (2025). Experiences of female school principals on resilient leadership practices in leading and managing rural schools. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 10(3), 868-897. <https://doi.org/10.30828/real.1651688>

### **Introduction**

The South African history of school leadership and experience has revealed that females can lead and want to take up leadership positions (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023; Nhlumayo & Nkosi, 2024). Chikwe, Eneh, and Akpuokwe (2024) argue that when women are given the opportunity to lead a school, they do better than their male counterparts. The leadership practices of female school principals, predominantly in rural schools, have earned significant interest within the education sector. However, females in leadership roles frequently contend with multifaceted challenges inherent to their positions. These require female leaders to be resilient and show extraordinary leadership skills. These challenges are compounded when they are leading in rural contexts. Rural contexts often encounter unique challenges, characterized by multiple deprivations which usually include a lack of resources, numerous economic hardships, and social disadvantages (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). Rural schools, in particular, come with their own array of difficult conditions, which exacerbate the phenomenon of gendered expectations for female leaders. Studies indicate that women in leadership continue to face

persistent and unresolved challenges (Haile, Emmanuel, & Dzathor, 2016; Weinstein, Sembler, Weinstein, et al., 2023). One of these is the exaggerated expectation that the public has of a grand performance when a female occupies a leadership position.

This paper focuses on the experiences of female principals in rural schools in using resilient leadership practices to weather any resistance and challenges that come against them due to their gender identity. Bhamra, Dani, and Burnard (2011) and Witmer (2019) define resilience as the strength to resist challenges meant to disrupt a particular process. The schools indicated as rural are located in communities characterised by existing patriarchal standards and values, such as traditional gender roles and criticism that weigh heavily against women (Gyan & Mfoafo-M'Carthy, 2022). Kutub (2023) further states that rural contexts are characterised by social structures and practices that give males power over females, such that when they are in leadership, they become subjected to these gendered expectations. De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) indicate that school principals are constrained by these dynamics to display resilience in their leadership practice to show that they are equal to the task.

McKinley (2023) asserts that gendered roles and expectations are synonymous with the victimisation and oppression of female school principals, putting pressure on them to perform in their leadership roles, thereby affecting their health. Sharma (2022) refers to this as gender inequality and further claims that it is mostly women who suffer the negative impact of these societal gendered norms and roles. They may feel restricted from the freedom to be themselves and thus end up exhibiting resilient leadership practices to withstand and resist any opposition that is directed at them. Studies indicate that some rural communities use their cultural backgrounds to discriminate

against women (DeKeseredy, 2020; Hathi, Coffey, Thorat, et al., 2021; Love, Nikolaev & Dhakal, 2024). This phenomenon then infiltrates schools where females are in leadership. One of the challenges faced by these school principals relates to authority and power struggles, as argued by Ahmad and Haryanto (2023). These are indications of deeply embedded cultural norms and patriarchy prevalent in rural and traditional communities where the schools are located. These characteristics have a negative influence on the execution of leadership for female school leaders in traditional communities. Local and international discourses seem to support gender equality in leadership spaces; however, the practice is different, as female school principals have to face struggles in the communities where their schools are located. Female school principals have to struggle against the odds and exhibit resilient leadership practices to survive in the leadership space. Mpofu (2019) argues that these gendered expectations and patriarchal ideologies are explicitly related to gender stereotypes and institutional discrimination experienced by females in school leadership. These dynamics leave the female school principals with two choices: either seize those leadership positions and lead with resilience or stay in lower-ranking roles and allow men to lead. Kulkarni and Mishra (2021) claim that, generally, women in leadership often exhibit qualities traditionally associated with femininity, such as admirable expressive abilities, high-class persuasion and compromise skills, empathy, and sympathy. On the contrary, Odell (2020) claims that males in leadership are not defined or evaluated based on gender-related traits, and this creates a boundary regarding how these two genders practice their leadership abilities. For females to survive in their school leadership roles, they must become aggressive, strong, powerful, and resilient. In their study on women in leadership, Wells and Fleshman (2020) assent with the claim that females in school leadership face

societal pressure to assert their authority and establish their presence to combat discrimination, inequality, and societal neglect. It is against this background that this paper investigated resilient leadership practices of female school principals in leading and managing schools within the context of rurality.

### **Problem Statement**

Generally, leadership is regarded by society as a male-centric arena, and females in leadership have to regularly prove to stakeholders that they are well-suited for the roles they occupy. And that they are equal to the task. According to Haile et al. (2016), this phenomenon is called negative gender stereotyping. Female leaders are confronted with the challenges of tokenism, and their leadership skills are constantly tested, thus having to constantly prove themselves to stakeholders, including the community where the school is located. Other factors that may be used to discriminate against female school principals include age, race, marital status, and qualifications; however, females in school leadership may be perceived as token appointments based on gender or affirmative action policies. This calls for them to put in twice the leadership effort compared to their male counterparts, thus putting pressure on them as they execute their leadership practice. Corroborating this view are Bodalina and Mestry (2022), who indicate that, in doing this, society pits female school principals against their male counterparts regarding their leadership performance.

Studies indicate that most females in school leadership often struggle with having their authority challenged and their credibility doubted (Keohane, 2020; Coleman, 2020; Pick, 2024). The authors further argue that Female school leaders often encounter resistance and a lack of compliance from both male and female colleagues. Against this backdrop, this paper explored the resilient leadership practices of

female principals in rural schools. The aim was to examine how female school principals navigate resilient leadership practices while managing both gendered performance expectations and the unique challenges of rural schools. Given the purpose, the following research question is formulated: How do female school principals use resilient leadership strategies to lead and manage schools within the context of rurality?

### **Literature Review**

This paper examined the literature on the following themes: Resilient leadership experiences for female principals in school leadership and navigating gendered expectations in rural school leadership. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

#### **Resilient leadership experiences for female principals in school leadership**

Arguably, the role of the school principal is the most influential in the provision of education in the school. According to Riani and Ain (2022), the role of the school principal fluctuates between being a manager, leader, supervisor, administrator, teacher, innovator, and motivator. When the school principal is confronted with contextual and societal challenges, it affects their operational responsibilities. In their qualitative study on the leadership practices of principals during the COVID-19 pandemic, conducted in the Philippines, Pedroso, Siason Jr, and Tangco-Siason (2021) indicate that school principals must use situational leadership practices to resist challenges experienced at a particular time. In their study on protesting by women in educational leadership, Chase and Martin (2019) assert that female school leaders still face stereotyping, characterisation, and discrimination. Furthermore, in an Israeli study conducted by Halevi

and Schechter (2023), the findings indicated that resilience is a process that women leaders have to adapt to as they face leadership pressures.

However, through resilience and allegiance to social justice, they can transcend societal challenges, stereotypes, and oppressive ideologies and systems that shape their reality. Among the hardships that female school principals face to this day, Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) list gendered stereotypes as external factors where they are considered unsuitable for leadership positions. Rural communities place unreasonable demands on female school principals, and Wang, Pollock, and Hauseman (2023) posit that some of these demands can induce negative emotions in the school principals' welfare and that of the schools. Mashiane (2022) resonates that this is the case in rural areas, in most African social structures. Therefore, to circumvent these, female school principals cope by using adaptive strategies such as resilient leadership practices. School leadership has traditionally been demarcated as the domain of males in general, and that accounts for the patriarchal behaviours that seem to influence school leadership and management. Some female school principals live with these unreasonable gendered role demands to such an extent that it affects their physical and emotional health. Burton, Cyr, and Weiner (2020) claim that to avoid physical and psychological distress, female school principals use coping strategies that may include self-protective measures such as resistance. Hryniewicz and Vianna (2018) state that since leadership is not a fixed practice, female school principals find themselves having to apply resilient leadership based on the contextual factors in which they find themselves. To thrive in these circumstances, female school principals may adopt resilient leadership practices that may include self-confidence and emotional intelligence (Eliot, 2020). Determination and commitment to succeed in leadership,

despite the contextual and societal challenges, are some characteristics that female school principals use as fuel to navigate the gendered role expectations, as discussed in the following section. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the resilient leadership practices drawn from the female school principals as they navigate the challenges they experience in leading and managing rural schools.

### **Navigating challenges experienced by females in rural school leadership**

Educational leadership scholars argue that principals' leadership practices are shaped and influenced by the broader community, school environment, and organizational context. (Hayes, Flowers & Williams, 2021; Pedroso, Siason Jr, & Tangco-Siason, 2021). Therefore, understanding how principals operate in rural schools is essential to recognizing how they interpret and enact their leadership to address the diverse needs of their rural community stakeholders. Findings from a study on navigating gender stereotypes in educational leadership by Shah (2023) revealed that females must negotiate gender stereotypes in cultures where they face challenges in asserting their authority, confronting misogynistic mindsets, and balancing work and personal life, all while actively and passionately engaging in educational leadership. Shah (2023) further states that traditional contexts believe that male leaders are more capable than female leaders; therefore, for women to succeed in leadership, they have to exhibit masculine behaviours. Such types of contexts have a bearing on how female school leaders may choose to practice their leadership. Females in rural school leadership often find themselves having to display a masculine work ethic, which Schull and Kihl (2018) describe as aggressive. At this juncture, resilient leadership becomes the leadership style female school leaders can use to get and stay ahead in



leadership. Further to this, females in rural school leadership use relationship-building and inclusive strategies as internal coping strategies to survive gendered expectations, as much is expected from them as their male counterparts (Stone, Ferguson & Boulden, 2024). Pick (2024) asserts that generally, females in rural spaces have a desire to achieve recognition in their leadership fields and possess feminine traits, which are internal strengths such as being better listeners, considerate, and sensitive, which they can use to their advantage to survive these challenges.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory that underpins this research paper is the social role theory by Eagly and Wood (1991). The social role theory frames the differences between males and females because of their biological and social influences. This theory highlights the causal impact that society's expectation has on the performance and conduct of each gender (Eagly & Wood, 1991). It is a sociological and psychological framework designed to justify and interpret human behaviour regarding societal roles, expectations, and norms. The theory further claims that roles that are occupied by individuals in society carry implicit or explicit expectations regarding how individuals in those roles should behave. Characteristics such as gender, age, race, religion, occupation, or marital status often define these roles, and they also shape how individuals perceive themselves and others, as well as the behaviours they demonstrate. However, for this paper, gender is the descriptor of how females are perceived by society as fit for school leadership. The social role theory is appropriate for this paper as it mirrors how females who lead schools, particularly in rural contexts, respond to unfair societal expectations bestowed on them based on their gender identity.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach, and the mode of inquiry was phenomenology. Leadership practices reflect the lived experiences of these female school principals, hence the use of phenomenology (Pilarska, 2021). All school principals are confronted with a continuous struggle to prove to the stakeholders that they are equal to the leadership task. However, with female school principals, the intensity of the struggle doubles. Three female school principals from one selected rural education circuit, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, were participants. The rationale behind the three participant-focused samples was the achievement of a more harmonious expression of participants' interpreted lived experiences in which individual voices were honoured and could contribute to a coherent whole (Bartholomew, Joy, & Kang, et al., 2021).

Data were generated through individual in-person interviews where participants shared their lived experiences, uncovering the deeper meanings through their interpretations (Aguas, 2022). The participants responded to the following questions:

1. What role do communities play in supporting gendered expectations from female school principals?
2. What resilient practices do school principals employ to survive the gendered expectations and gender discrimination when leading and managing schools in rural communities?
3. How do you overcome obstacles such as gendered expectations and discrimination in your practice as a female school principal?

Each interview lasted a minimum of one hour, with the aim of gaining in-depth insights into the participants' lived experiences. Conducting

the interviews within the participants' school offices, familiar and natural settings, helped foster a sense of comfort and security (Limpuattong, 2009).

The interview was conducted by an independent researcher from an academic institution, and in adhering to ethical considerations, the researcher obtained approval from the circuit manager to interview school principals and also obtained ethical clearance from their institution. The three school principals were intentionally selected based on their gender, their leadership positions, and, for this paper, as they were suitable participants to address the research question. Following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), inductive thematic analysis, where I identified themes directly from the data, was used. Generating and using the data from diverse sources, at different times and in different spaces, as outlined by Denzin (2012), allowed for triangulation in this paper. Following data transcription, the researcher conducted member-checking to verify the data and enhance trustworthiness by seeking participants' feedback prior to drafting the final paper.

The research sites were three schools located in one selected rural education district marked by multiple deprivations, including but not limited to lack of employment, education, healthcare, material resources, and infrastructure. The community struggles with social challenges such as poverty, disease, teenage pregnancy, and crime. In addition to these contextual factors, the community is grappling with societal, economic, political, and cultural challenges, most of which exclude females based on patriarchy by limiting their freedom and access. These challenges pose a severe threat to women's leadership and empowerment, equality, and development.



**Table 1**

*Profile of the research participants and research sites*

Participants and schools	Number of learners in the school	Qualifications	Age	Number of years as a teacher	Number of years as school principal
Principal A School A	366	M.Ed.	44	24	5
Principal B School B	478	M.Ed.	47	25	9
Principal C School C	569	PhD in progress	50	28	11

**Keys:** M.Ed. – Master of Education, PhD – Doctor of Philosophy

Table 1 above presents the demographic details of the participants and the research sites. The research sites were three primary schools purposively selected as they were headed by female school principals and located in a rural community in a selected education circuit. Pseudonyms have been used to indicate the participants and the research sites as follows:

Principal A to Principal C – PA to PC

School A to School C – SA to SC

### Findings

Verbatim participant quotes are used to present the findings, organized according to the themes that emerged from the data. Through these verbatim quotes of the participants, the sections below present the data findings according to the themes as they emerged from the data. The themes are the community's role in shaping gendered expectations of women in school leadership, resilient

leadership practices demonstrated by rural female school principals, and “*I refuse to quit*”.

### **The Community’s Role in Shaping Gendered Expectations of Women in School Leadership**

Responding to the question on what role the communities play in supporting gendered expectations from female school principals, participants revealed that rural communities have expectations from female school principals because of their gender identity. These were the perspectives expressed by the participants.

*As you can see the school is located in a rural area, the community here is welcoming, but they treat me differently from the previous school principal who was a male. At first, they did not recognise me and always compared me to the previous school principal. PA*

When probed further as to how the participant survived the comparison to their male counterpart, they revealed that they had to declare and reannounce that they were now in the lead, and they had to accept it, these were her words:

*I had to put my foot down and remind them that I am now the principal of the school, and there is nothing they can do, we can only move forward. PA*

Sharing similar sentiments with PA, PB revealed that the community where the school is situated still believes so much in leadership as a masculine domain that she constantly had to show her masculine traits to survive both inside and outside the school. This was her view:

*In most instances, I have to behave like a man because the community and some of my colleagues still believe very much in male leadership.*

**PB**

PC revealed that leading the school in this rural community has been a struggle that has uncovered how much power she possesses as a female school principal. Gendered expectations from the community have revealed that she has the power to do better than her male counterparts. These were her views:

*Since I arrived in this community, they still believe a man can do a better job at leading this school just because he is a male, they do not care about all the improvements I have made in the 11 years, it is a constant struggle, but we soldier on.* **PC**

The emerging data reveal that females in school leadership are faced with unique challenges that are inherent in rural and traditional communities. These challenges are formed based on their gender identity. Rural communities are dominated by male leadership (Edwards, 2018), and this phenomenon has a way of infiltrating the school that is situated in the community. These gender stereotypes are shaped by patriarchal societies and communities, assigning traditional roles to men and women. From a critical feminist point of view, these gender-related challenges exhibit a negative attitude, thus fuelling a resilient approach to leadership from the female school principal. These resilient approaches and strategies may be interpreted as authoritarian and dictatorial by those against the school leadership. Furthermore, based on the social role theory, society seems to perpetuate interpretations that can be labelled as stigmatisation, resentment, rejection, and discrimination against female school

leadership from the communities by allowing these gendered expectations. To survive in these rural and traditional communities, female school principals have to exhibit resilient leadership practices.

### **Resilient Leadership Practices Demonstrated By Rural Female School Principals**

The participants were asked what resilient practices they employed to survive the gendered expectations and gender discrimination formed against them in leading and managing the schools in rural communities. It emerged from the data that female school principals displayed traits of emotional intelligence, decisiveness, and competence, among others, to endure gender discrimination in their leadership space. PA revealed that being decisive and sticking to policy has assisted her in surviving the challenges in leadership. These were the views shared by PA:

*My coping mechanism is that I have developed the guts to make difficult decisions, I do not care who says what, as long as I stick to policy implementation, that is how I have learned to survive my colleagues and the community. PA*

PB revealed that having a high level of emotional intelligence has assisted her in leading and managing the school successfully amid the unfair gendered expectations from the community and her colleagues in the school.

*I can manage my emotions and those of others, I have also developed sober social skills so that I act accordingly when confronted with these kinds of behaviors levelled against me because I am a woman. You*

*need to show people that you are level-headed and that you are equal to the task at hand! PB*

Resonating with PB, PC revealed that being competent at what you do quietens the noise against you, and possessing a high level of confidence repels the negative noise around the leadership practice:

*Continuous learning is helping me, right now I am busy with my PhD, and it has improved both my competence in my work as well as the confidence I need to make unpopular decisions to survive, for me that is being resilient enough. Sometimes, it can be too much, and I would feel like quitting and pursuing my studies full-time, but it also shows the strength I have as a woman. PC*

Female leadership requires a higher level of resilience as it is fraught with more challenges than male leadership. To navigate the patriarchal ideologies and cultural adversities that are prevalent in rural communities, participants have developed resilience and strength in their personal and professional lives. The social role theory argues that people's performance in their personal and professional roles is shaped by society's expectations, depending on their gender. Owing to their resilient leadership practices, the participants endure and struggle with being labelled as strict and harsh in leading and managing their schools. Communities where the schools are located do not trust female school leadership, as, according to them, leadership is a male-dominated terrain. It is against these gender-discriminatory societal tendencies that females in school leadership have to display these resilient leadership practices to survive. In their study on women leaders navigating cultural adversity, Chance (2022) indicates that females must set clear standards on what can and cannot be tolerated



in their leadership spaces, and they must develop a “no-nonsense attitude” while holding a strong work ethic.

### **“I Refuse To Quit”**

It is worth noting that participants were school principals who had intentionally applied and were qualified to be in these positions; however, societal expectations have influenced their lived experience in the leadership space because of their gender. Responding to a question on overcoming obstacles in their position as female school principals, it emerged from participants that they refused to quit and be stopped in their leadership, thereby revealing a resilient approach. From the words of PA, it emerged that a certain level of confidence is necessary when one is confronted with challenges that stand against their very identity. This was her view:

*I remain undefeated amid all the hardships I have endured in the five years of rural school leadership; the behaviour of the community here has exposed the strength within me that I can overcome adversity while remaining true to myself and staying the course. PA*

It emerged from PC's view that assertiveness, confidence, and self-assurance were qualities of resilience that one needed to possess in the face of adversity. This is what she shared.

*Evaluating the number of years I have spent in the teaching profession as a teacher and as a school principal, there is no turning back or slowing down. I have been in this position for 11 years now and it has not been a bed of roses, but one thing is for sure, we soldier on. PC*

One cannot survive without collaboration, as no leader has ever achieved some deal of success alone. This was evident in PB's view:

*I have the support of my mentors, family, and district officials, I understand that leadership comes with responsibility. Therefore, as much as I am strong and resilient, I always network and collaborate so that I am ready for challenges and exercise integrity in dealing with those challenges. PB*

Having a vision that is bigger than the contextual challenges of a rural school and gendered expectations from society, amounts to resilient leadership practice. In PC's words, it can be gleaned that having a vision as a leader would enable female school leaders to withstand any challenges directed at them.

*I will not lie, there were times when I felt like quitting and going back to my previous school, but I had a vision for my school and I am authentic and honest enough to rope everyone in, including the community to move forward. PC*

Challenging circumstances demand a resolute stance in leadership. Resilience refers to the ability to remain strong amid challenges and adversity. Structural attributes of rural communities tend to influence the leadership patterns in those communities. This trend spills down to the schools located in those communities. In a study on rural school leaders in South Africa, Smit (2017) indicates that female leadership is linked to care and emotions, such that when female school principals display a resilient character, they are deemed to behave like men. Bush, Kirezi, Ashford and Glover (2022) attribute this phenomenon to social attitudes from the communities, thus resonating with the social role

theory. The authors assert that these deeply embedded social attitudes indicate that females should focus on family responsibilities, rather than leading schools. Further to this, the authors indicate that female school principals should use collegial and collaborative qualities to their advantage as they assist them in becoming effective school leaders. Female school principals who have a vision and want to see their schools succeed tend to work against any disadvantages presented by the rural contexts and rural communities and display their resilient potential through their leadership.

### Discussion

Social Role Theory asserts that societal norms assign different expectations to men and women, often associating leadership with masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and independence, while aligning women with nurturing, supportive, and communal roles (Eagly & Wood, 2011). The findings reveal that rural communities often expect female principals to conform to traditional gender norms, viewing them through the lens of caregiving and emotional labour rather than professional leadership. Participants reported that their authority was at times undermined due to community-held beliefs that leadership is best suited to men. Gardiner (2015) indicates that these contextual and societal stereotypes are socially constructed phenomena that tamper with the authenticity of the leader. Furthermore, these expectations reinforce the theory's premise that women in leadership positions experience role incongruity, whereby the expectations of their gender conflict with the attributes associated with effective leadership. This tension forces female principals to constantly negotiate their professional identities, balancing cultural expectations of femininity with the demands of school leadership.

Despite these challenges, the study found that the participants consistently demonstrated resilience in their leadership. Pillay-Naidoo and Nel (2022) define resilience as the ability to overcome and circumvent threats and challenges while possessing the capacity to deal with future challenges. The participants employed relational, collaborative, and emotionally intelligent strategies to manage conflict, build trust, and sustain school functioning under resource-constrained conditions. These approaches align with socially prescribed "feminine" characteristics; however, the female principals leveraged these traits not as limitations, but as strengths within their leadership practice. Through the lens of Social Role Theory, this finding illustrates that while gender roles impose constraints, women can also strategically adapt and repurpose these roles to lead effectively. Rather than adopting traditionally masculine leadership traits, these principals demonstrated that communal leadership styles are not only culturally appropriate in rural contexts but are also instrumental in fostering resilience. This challenges dominant leadership discourses that equate effective leadership with control and authority, highlighting the need for more inclusive conceptions of leadership that recognise the value of relational and context-responsive approaches.

The third theme, "I Refuse to Quit," encapsulates the participants' unwavering commitment to their roles, despite the personal and professional pressures they encountered. This theme illustrates an important dimension of Social Role Theory that is sometimes overlooked: the capacity for individual agency and resistance in the face of constraining social norms. The female principals' determination to persevere in leadership, despite systemic barriers, reflects a process of role negotiation and redefinition. While they were subject to gendered expectations, they did not passively conform to them. Instead, they actively reinterpreted what it meant to be a woman

leader in a rural context, integrating both resilience and assertiveness into their leadership identities. This finding suggests that gender roles, though socially constructed, are not fixed; rather, they can be contested, reshaped, and expanded through the lived experiences and agency of individuals.

### **Theoretical Implications and Implications for Practice and Conclusion**

The study contributes to Social Role Theory by extending it into rural, under-researched educational leadership contexts, demonstrating how women navigate, challenge, and reshape socially constructed roles, highlighting resilience as a context-specific, gender-influenced leadership strategy, suggesting that gender roles are not only constraining but can also be harnessed for effective leadership.

The paper calls for actions that intend to undo deep-rooted gender prejudices in school leadership. Further to this, the paper recommends education programmes that capacitate rural communities to address family and social attitudes. There must be the establishment of programs that sensitize the community to issues of gender, where all stakeholders, including community leaders, parents, and the school governing body members, assist in raising awareness on gender issues. Over the years, educational leadership has embraced the appointment of females into school leadership; however, societal expectations have increasingly become gendered against them. This has prompted the aggressive use of resilient leadership practices by female school principals to withstand these societal-gendered expectations. Therefore, this paper advocates for community engagement in dissipating the biased patriarchal philosophy that males make better leaders than females and that female leaders need to double their efforts to survive in the leadership space. Furthermore, there is also a

need for policy transformation to advance gender equality and empower female leaders, establishing community-inclusive educational settings, particularly in rural traditional contexts.

One notable limitation of the study is the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of school principals. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data collection restricts the ability to observe changes over time. Nevertheless, the participants were purposively selected for their relevance and appropriateness in addressing the research objectives. Although the study was limited to one selected education district, the findings can be transferable to other rural contexts where female school principals are at the helm of school leadership and experience similar challenges.

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