

**Gender transformation experiences among women leaders in the  
Western Cape TVET sector: A narrative response**

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**STORYLINE**

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**BACKGROUND AND KEY QUESTION**

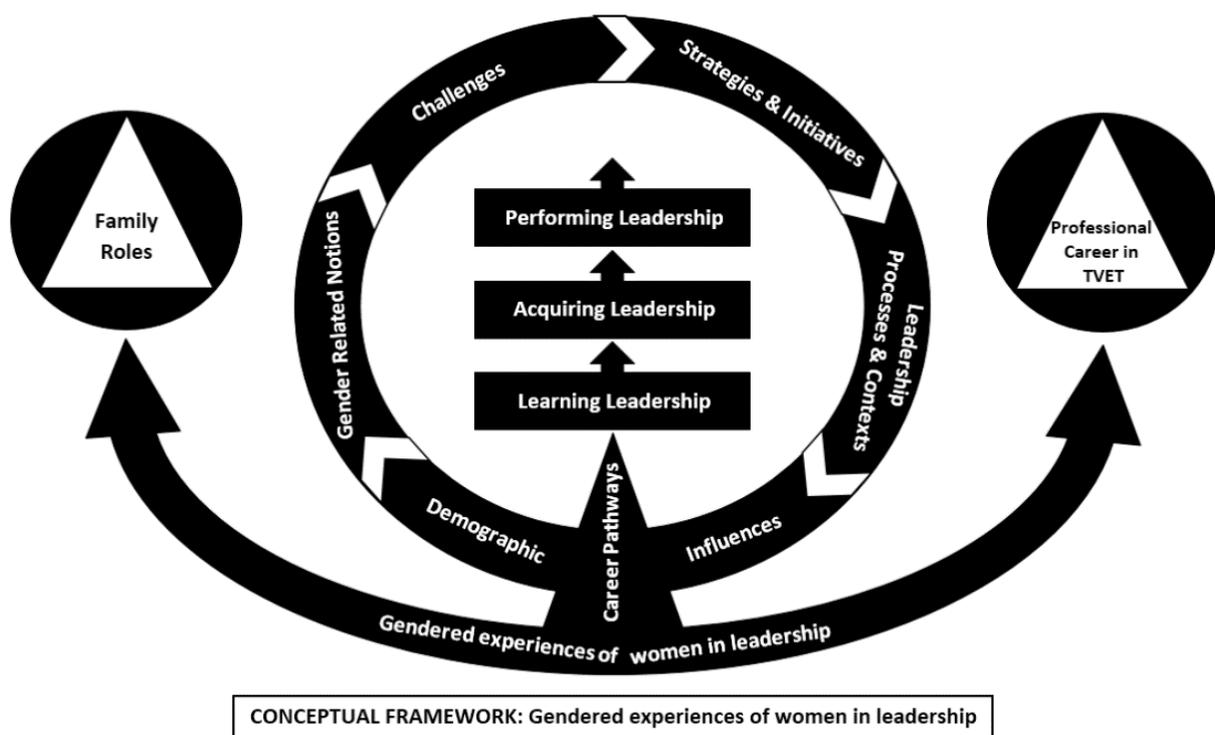
I'm not the woman president of Harvard, I'm the president of Harvard (Drew Gilpin Faust, President, Harvard University, 2016).

Promoting the cause of women in leadership has received attention nationally and internationally. Gender quotas were introduced to increase the representation of women in leadership (Dlamini 2013). However, a census of the South African Businesswomen's Association indicates that women are still underrepresented in many different leadership positions. These findings are also true for educational leadership globally. In addition, TVET colleges receive insufficient scholarly attention nationally (Kraak 2012). Moreover, Dlamini (2013) maintains that in-depth studies of South African women leaders' life stories are inadequate. Such studies can give women a voice and are a richer source of information than is possible through merely statistical means. As recent as December 2017, despite legislation and policy initiatives regarding gender equality, Technical and Vocational Education and Training

(TVET) colleges only comprised 15 women principals nationally out of a possible 50 such positions (DHET 2017).

The Department of Education and Training affirms that the management of TVET colleges should be transformed. Hence, this paper reports on the narratives of ten black, coloured, Indian, and white women leaders in the Western Cape TVET sector. The respondents were purposively selected and comprised three principals, five deputy-principals, one campus manager and one academic head. The observations above collectively beg the question: “What prevent women in TVET colleges from reaching top leadership positions?” Presently, we do not know why women are not participating equally in TVET leadership, thus the objective was to narrate their stories in such a way that it may clarify this conundrum. Their storied accounts are reflected against a conceptual framework / roadmap developed for this purpose.

### CONCEPTUAL ROAD MAP



**Figure 1:** Roadmap for interpreting public TVET college women leaders’ gendered experiences on their career pathways (adapted from Maritz 2013)

Gendered experiences of women leaders in public vocational education are intrinsically connected with both a professional career in TVET and family roles – the two being mutually inclusive, and can, secondly, be linked to three different career pathways. So, gendered

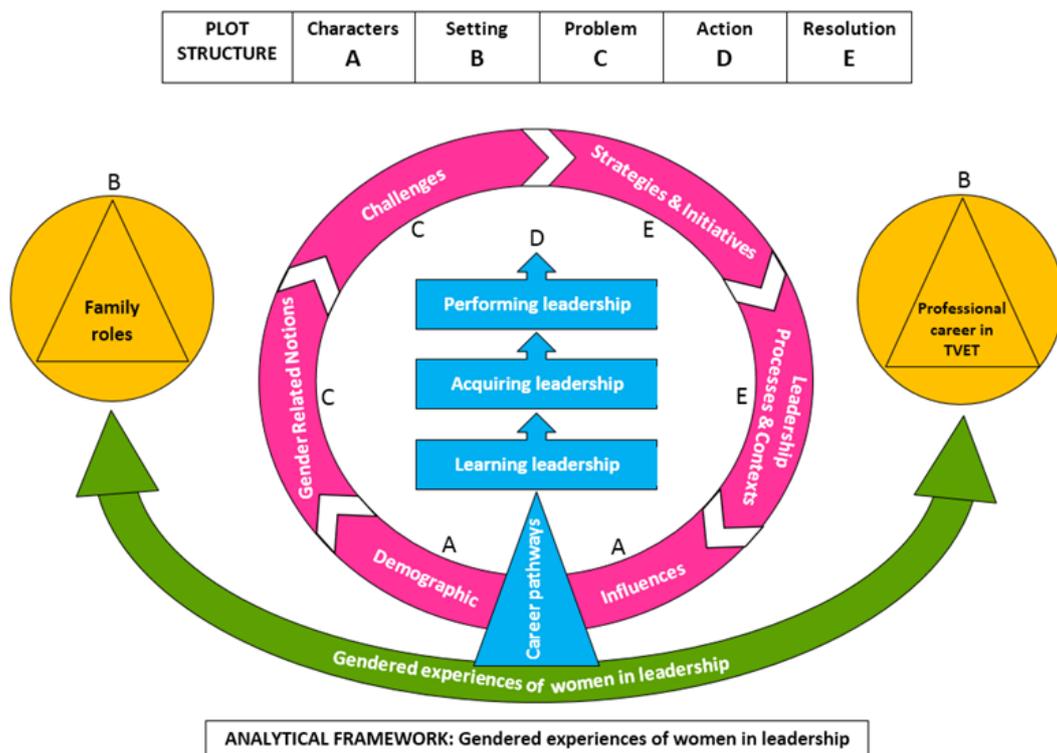
experiences may be influenced by the way in which they balance their family roles and their professional careers. Furthermore, these gendered experiences could emerge at any of the three different phases of their career paths, namely learning, acquiring, and performing leadership. Lastly, experiences could be influenced by demographics, gender-related notions, challenges, leadership processes and contexts, and strategies advancing their careers.

## METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study on which this paper draws, an interpretive narrative approach was followed with unstructured interviews for data collection. Narrative studies illustrate individuals’ ways of constructing and making sense of experience. The reported study took an insiders’ approach and happened within a specific setting where different perspectives led to a narrative construction (Creswell 2007).

The “codus” operandi were firstly based on theming interviews according to the roadmap. Then the interpreted data were placed in a narrative context called a problem-solution approach where data were analysed for five elements of plot structure (characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolutions) using alphabetical labelling (Saldana 2013). Next, data were merged with themes in the roadmap to yield the analytical framework below.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK



**Figure 2:** Analytical framework for interpreting and re-storying public TVET college women leaders' gendered experiences within the bounds of a plot structure (adapted from Maritz 2013).

In Figure 2 five plot structure elements were aligned with the roadmap in Figure 1. Demographic influences moulded the characters' (A) personalities. These experiences hinged on (and could be related to) both family roles and a professional career in TVET providing the setting (B). Along with the research question, the problem (C) comprised gender stereotyping and gender-related challenges. Penultimately, the action (D) arose through gendered experiences that could emerge during the different phases of their career paths. Lastly, strategies and leadership processes provided resolutions (E) to deal with gender-related issues.

The next seven slides report on the constructed narrative (re-storying of women leaders' perspectives) that resulted from aligning my perspectives from the studied literature with the empirical results by means of code weaving where topic sentences were used to link chunks of quoted text from the respondents' narratives (Saldana 2013).

Specific reference is given to the research questions – the general experiences of women leaders (characters) in the TVET college sector in the Western Cape (setting), how gender transformation affected their career progression (action), and what strategies and initiatives (resolution) they adopted to deal with gender-related issues (problem).

## **CONSTRUCTED NARRATIVE (STORY) – Introduction**

### **(RQ 1: Respondents' experiences as leaders)**

Gender transformation in TVET colleges was a process that only formally started with the passing of the FET Colleges Amendment Act No. 3 of 2012 (RSA 2012) and formalised by the White Paper in 2013 (RSA 2013) addressing, among other matters, gender inequality. TVET colleges subsequently had to design a gender equity plan, renew the plan annually, and submit the plan to their respective college councils for approval. Against this background the interpreted data were placed in a narrative context.

### **STORY – Characters A**

There has been a debate for years about what makes a leader. Are leaders born or made? And women leaders? Although there is still no clarity, the study reported on in this paper indicates that demographic influences have certainly moulded the characters' personalities in dealing with gendered experience (Hall 1997; Auster 2001). Respondent (R1)'s father was a Dutch

Reformed minister and she grew up as a first-born in the countryside. Although she provided examples of gender-stereotypical roles, it was evident that she acquired leadership skills intuitively:

My father groomed me to take a lead in the house; to always make sure that I take decisions, 'cause I was the boy in the house, but I was in the body of a girl [R1].

R4 called herself a “spoilt brat” and an only “grandparent child”. She had good teachers who boosted her “academic strength” right from the beginning.

I realised from a young age that I had something that the other children didn't have. And that gave me the extra confidence [R4].

R5 married and divorced twice. She raised three children. “I had to stick it out for myself.” A devoted leader. Yet, her strong personality did not safeguard her against gendered experiences that cropped up in both professional and family roles, providing us with the setting for our story.

### **STORY – Setting B**

As found in the studied literature, the gendered experiences of TVET women leaders are intricately balanced in their professional careers and family roles. R2 admitted that she neglected her family, but felt driven to succeed and furthered her postgraduate studies abroad:

My successes came at the expense of my family. It's hard work and sacrifices. I mean, how can you leave two toddlers with a dad and a nanny for so many months [R2]?

The work/family conflict adversely affected most of the respondents' health. Excessive workload often resulted in burn-out or hospitalisation (Diaz-Garcia and Welter 2011). R2 explained:

Yes. Hundred times! Aag, as jy 'n week in die hospitaal is op 'n drip [Oh, if you are in hospital on a drip for a week] [...], my stress attacks me physically [R2].

When you're supposed to go off on sick leave, you're still on it, until you reach a point by the end of the year where you're just so tired, you're just not functioning [R10].

### **STORY – Problem C**

#### **RQ 2: How gender transformation affected respondents (if at all)**

During the apartheid's years, women's salaries were lower than those of their male counterparts and they had to resign when they fell pregnant. Promotion was only available when “somebody

dies” [R4] or after waiting for “fifty years” [R9]. R3, R5 and R7 experienced fierce gender discrimination early in their careers, and were unable to obtain permanent posts if they were engaged to be married: “I had to hide my engagement ring in the cubby-hole [R3]”.

All respondents made mention of both men-to-women, and women-to-women discrimination. Quotes referring to bigotry came to light e.g.: “male chauvinist” [R5]; “he treated women like dirt” [R9] and “you live invisible” [R8]. Envy curbed career progression; a notion Van Zyl (2009) named the PHD (pull-him/her-down) syndrome. “I decided to quit because of this rude, aggressive woman that needed to assert herself [R9].” “I’m tired of being hurt [R1].”

The possibility of the “halo effect” where “likable” answers are given, could not be ruled out (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). I sensed that R7, R3 and R10 were quite guarded in their responses and did not describe many gender-related incidents.

### **STORY – Action D**

Along their career paths gendered experiences emerged at any of three different phases (Acker 2009). During the learning leadership phase, sexism emerged, and it appeared as if the men purposely exploited the women to their own advantage in an organisational culture where masculinity still dominated most of the systems and leadership approaches. “I was the only woman lecturer on an engineering campus. Rude remarks surfaced almost every day [R5].” “They only listened when I started swearing at them [R9].”

The acquiring leadership phase, annoyed the women leaders with masculine hierarchies, marginalisation and the preservation of gender segregation in a male-dominated organisational culture. “During my interview, the board asked me if I could handle the male staff [R7]!” Competition for top leadership positions became extremely fierce. The so-called glass ceiling coerced R6 into applying for fifteen deputy principal posts prior to her appointment as college principal: “If I could only crack it, so that the next person can go through, it will be fine [R6].”

During the performing leadership phase men’s conduct bordered on rudeness. They ignored new ideas of women in meetings, including ideas from their women superiors. “Really, the men visibly switch off [R8].” “When the principals meet with the regional office and a senior woman official at DHET makes a proposal, they grind her. “I find that men do not listen very well [R6].”

Next, as the resolution of our story, respondents attempted to provide *strategies* and different leadership approaches in various contexts as *initiatives* to deal with gendered experiences.

## **STORY – Resolution E: Strategies**

### **RQ 3: Strategies and initiatives respondents adopted to deal with gender-related issues**

Respondents battled to provide me with evidence that they had successfully dealt with gender-related issues. Work pressures were not addressed through restructuring roles according to workload. The studied literature solicited the utilisation of support structures such as family-friendly policies, flexi-time, childcare facilities on site, and safety measures eliminating potential sources of stress like hijacking after late meetings (Suraj-Narayan 2005). No evidence was provided. No protective strategies that address subtle men-to-women and women-to-women discrimination emerged from the data. R1 made peace with the inevitable. She used the word “peace” twenty-six times during her interview. A “mother-hen” leadership tactic failed and finally, R4 had sensed so many adverse emotions that she had “shut up” and applied the “silent strategy”. Her advice had fallen on deaf ears and she had surrendered to protect herself.

Developing women through mentoring (Doubell and Struwig 2013) emerged in the stories of most respondents although only R1’s mentoring was formal; the rest happened on an ad hoc basis.

The data support Tessens et al.’s (2011) notion that training programmes and furthering one’s studies are strategies against gender discrimination. Respondents 7, 10, 2, 8, 4, 6 and 3 benefitted from studying although the studies were not focused towards gender discrimination.

Penultimately, the theoretical perspective alluding to peer and supervisor support (Hoyt 2010) was only supported by data from R5 and R10.

Lastly, several scholars stressed the importance of networking for aspirant women leaders in order to connect with influential business leaders and advance their own careers (Doubell and Struwig 2013) although this was not supported by the data.

## **STORY – Resolution E: Initiatives**

Leadership approaches and management styles were analysed as possible initiatives to reduce adverse gendered experiences. Mauthner and Edwards (2010) argue that women use an authoritarian management style to resist power imbalances. The data revealed that R1, R3, R4 and R9 battled to affirm themselves in a male-dominated space. They tried to build relationships, then reverted to aggression; R9 even started swearing like the men, portraying contingent and autocratic leadership approaches. R4 described herself as “the motherly type”,

which coincides with Lumby and Azaola's (2014) finding of a self-reported mothering leadership style by over 50% of a group of women leaders.

R3 followed a transactional leadership approach when she asked two men to clean the campus. When they became despondent, she offered them some refreshments and “da’ gaat hulle weer lank aan” [and that got them going again for a long time]. R9 depicted her previous male CEO as a remarkable transformational leader and decided to emulate this leadership style as a resolution to bring about gender transformation.

## **THE STORIED STORIES**

### **Gender transformation in the Western Cape TVET sector: A narrative response**

Our story does not have a joyful ending. The respondents' feelings of defeat revealed that many men and women still got away with subtle gender discriminatory behaviour and that gender transformation could not simply be quantified in terms of equity only.

Firstly, in terms of career progression, the demographics, setting and action (career pathways) revealed that the older respondents experienced progressive gender transformation, although only late in their careers. In contrast, those respondents who were ten to twenty years younger than the older leaders – all women of colour – progressed quickly. Thus, the changing social context that is underway as a result of equity legislation has, in fact, enabled women to move beyond the patriarchal constraints that have subjected women to subordinate status to take up positions of leadership.

Secondly, despite legislation, gender discrimination prevail. Respondents still struggle to achieve promotion due to subtle men-to-women and women-to-women discrimination. Also, the data revealed that gender stereotyping and various other gender-related challenges restricting career progression caused some of the respondents to abandon their ambition by the performance phase of the career pathway as in “I can't do it anymore” [R5].

Thirdly, gender transformation legislation failed to equip respondents with strategies in dealing with gender discrimination and respondents grappled to produce evidence. The data revealed that most women leaders worked harder than men to “prove” themselves and/or to compete for senior positions, so much so that many respondents complained about health problems. This scenario, where competent, potential women leaders surrender and/or even leave the sector, aggravates the dearth of women among the pool of aspiring principals, although the sample size precludes any claim that my conclusions refer to all women in leadership roles in TVET.

Finally, according to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) “narrative smoothing” could have occurred during the interviewing and/or re-storying processes, thus we also need to interrogate the untold stories or “narrative secrets”. Moreover, this paper does not have a “Hollywood plot” – a specific danger in narrative, where all is well in the end.

## **THE END(ING)**

In the study reported in this paper we explored ten gender transformation experiences of women leaders in TVET colleges in the Western Cape through a narrative approach, focusing on purposively selected respondents’ stories. Women leaders’ gendered experiences were interpreted via a conceptual roadmap, and then – through several coding methods – re-storied within the bounds of a specific plot structure (characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolutions), illustrated in an aligned analytical framework. The results reveal that women in educational leadership positions are still underrepresented and gender transformation endeavours do not seem to permeate the education sector adequately. Progress has been made regarding gender equity, but gender stereotyping and discrimination still prevail.

## **LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS**

The study reported in this paper serves as a point of departure in addressing all-inclusive gender transformation to the advantage of potential and existing women and men in TVET college leadership positions. However, it is impossible to make any generalisations with regard to a wider population due to the limited sample size of this study. Given the limited sample available, no differentiation was made between the experiences of senior and top women leaders, that is campus, senior, or portfolio managers, academic heads, and vice-principals or principals.

Furthermore, boundaries that were set for the study included no interpretation – other than gender – in terms of diversity (encompassing race, gender, culture, tenure, education, age, ethnic group, personality, organisational function, cognitive style, and background) or intersectionality (intersecting social identities). The study was restricted to women leaders in the Western Cape TVET colleges. This could yield different perspectives to those in the rest of South Africa due to various reasons, including socio-economic, racial, cultural, and political differences. Also, a study identifying the mechanisms that create gender discrimination and that offer alternatives to inform, sensitise, and transform society is lacking. Lastly, the role of male leaders and partners who have empowered women on their college career pathways remains unresolved.

## **SIGNIFICANCE**

This paper adds to the limited literature on women leaders' life stories. For policy developers seeking to reduce gender discrimination and stereotyping among potential TVET college leaders, strategies and initiatives from this paper might promote interest in formulating interventions to inform, sensitise, empower and/or transform men and women leaders at key stages of their career pathways. For advisory boards seeking to capacitate current and potential leaders through an all-inclusive gender transformation strategy, this paper provides guidelines which could form part of diversity management listed under management skills of Robertson's (2015) leadership curriculum framework model.

Finally, regarding the broader significance of this paper, there is still a great deal to be done. Behind the reported narratives are the untold stories and much scope for further research. This paper therefore serves as a point of departure in addressing all-inclusive gender transformation to the advantage of women and men in TVET college leadership.

I wish to close with the words of Kwame Nkrumah who said: "The forces that unite us are intrinsic, and greater than the super imposed influences that keep us apart." As men and women leaders, let us remain united, to build a strong TVET college sector in SA. Thank you very much.

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