Overcoming Gender-Based Discrimination Practices Through Education: Experiences of Three Selected Women

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ABSTRACT

Disparity in access to educational opportunities is a pressing gender equity issue in many developing countries including Zimbabwe. Legislations world over have been put in place to curb the education discrimination against women, but it is sad to note that even with these legal instruments women are still being discriminated in educational opportunities especially in the developing countries. A survey of the occupants of highly qualified positions within the education sector reveals that most of the positions are occupied by males largely due to the fact that they had the educational opportunities to advance their studies. Several studies have focused on the causes and effects of this scenario. Relatively few studies have been done to consider the experiences of women who got the educational opportunities and made good use of them. It is therefore the object of this study to hear the views of educational successful women and learn from their experiences on overcoming the educational discriminations. Making use of biographic information of three selected women, the study concludes that women can at times win the struggle against discrimination by being vigilant in their goals.

Key Terms: gender-based discrimination, educational opportunities, disparity, gender equity and women

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The women in Zimbabwe like other women in Africa still suffer from discrimination in accessing education. Being guided by the liberal feminists theories and perspectives the African governments have crafted many responsive gender regulations to try and make sure the girl child is treated fairly in educational opportunities. Women in Zimbabwe as well as in Africa have been plagued by limited access to education (Richburg et al, 2002). Disparity in access to educational opportunity is a pressing gender equity issue (World Bank, 2003). Bush (1995) asserts that there are many possible reasons for this disparity, but there can be little doubt that women are educationally disadvantaged. Studies continue to show that women experience gender inequity in salary, employment, leadership, and politics (Collins, 1998; Pippa, 2001; Rhode, 2003). Even when women gain more access to education, this does not necessarily translate to equal educational and career opportunities (Misko, 2001).

Theoretical framework: Theory of Self-Identity

This study is mainly based on Goffman's *Self presentation* (1959) and the idea is further supported by the work of Brukitt's (2008) *Social Selves* and Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1971). 'Identity' and 'selfhood' are terms used throughout the human sciences that seek to analyze and describe the character of everyday life experience. It is a multi-dimensional construct that refers to an individual's perception of self in relation to any number of characteristics such as, gender roles and sexuality racial identity, ethnicity, class, where gender has been an important factor in the formation of self –identity (Goffman 1959). Women in general find themselves having to define and explain their roles and worth in the midst of male patriarchy and male chauvinism. It is those who have self-consciousness, self-awareness and self-esteem on one's self that excel against all odds.

The concept of self -identity is useful in this study for understanding how women have understood themselves in comparison to men and how they have constructed their self, and how they have defined themselves and their

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social status in the process of constructing their self -identity in their societies. In the process of constructing their self, there are various factors that hinder women and minimize their progress. Literature has few cases of women who have made fame in their lives like the following:

Margaret "The Iron Lady" Thatcher

Born on October 13, 1925, in Grantham, England, Margaret Thatcher became Britain's Conservative Party leader and in 1979 was elected prime minister, the first woman to hold the position. Her being the first woman to hold such a position posits that she identified herself as a leader and surpassed male chauvinism. She considered herself fit in the man's world. For women to achieve in their lives they have to be driven by sense of purpose. Without a purpose the journey is bleak. Thus throughout her political life, Thatcher was driven by a sense of purpose, a clear sense of destiny, and a deep-seated patriotism, there is no question that she was a role model.

Oprah Winfrey

She was born to a single teenage mother in rural Mississippi. She felt unwanted and was shuttled back and forth from her grandmother to her mother and then to her father by the time she was 14. She lived in poverty and suffered abuse for years (Matthew, 2009). This does not sound like the beginnings of a media mogul who would go on to own a cable network and become one of America's most influential people and the first African-American billionaire, and yet it is.

Despite growing under the shadow of abuse, poverty, and neglect Oprah developed great resilience that made her rise above obstacles. "Turn your wounds into wisdom," she tells the viewers of her network.

Joyce Meyer

Joyce Meyer is a charismatic Christian speaker and author, Meyer went through a great deal of turmoil in her early life but rose from them all to build one of the world's largest Christian ministries in the world.

At a young age, Joyce was filled with a sense of self-pity. She was hardly manageable and developed a controlling, manipulative, insecure and harsh behaviour. She experienced a feeling of guilt and adopted a negative thinking that was powered by suspicion. Worst was that she never felt safe anywhere. Despite being victim of the maltreatment, Joyce did not give up on her studies and completed her graduation from O'Fallon Technical High School in St Louis.

Despite gender discrimination, various forms of abuse and male chauvinism, these women came out of their situations even much stronger.

Aim of the study

The purpose of the study is to document the experiences of successful women in the academic and social spheres, highlighting the challenges of gender discrimination they overpowered and draw some fundamental strategies of overpowering educational discrimination that can be applied by other women in similar predicaments.

Research Questions

- What gender based challenges were experienced by selected successful women?
- What strategies did the successful women employ to get where they are in their careers?
- What lessons can be drawn from these strategies used in dealing with gender discrimination?

METHODOLOGY

The study made use of biographic information of three selected women who have surpassed gender discrimination to acquire academic objectives. The three women were interviewed used indepth interviews and

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focus group discussion. The focus group discussion was used to confirm the responses obtained through personal interviews and also to allow the participants to reflect on their responses in a group set up. The logic behind this decision was to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions of their experiences in gender discrimination and draw lessons from the strategies.

PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profiles of Participants (All Pseudo Names)

Sharon

Personal background

- A 43 year old participant, married and has two children.
- Shona by ethnic origin and a Christian by religious affiliation.
- Holds an Honours degree in Counselling.
- Teacher at a high school in Bulawayo.

Personal experience

- Being a mother and a wife does not hinder her success. She manages to juggle the three.
- Lessons to other women: trust in God, believe in yourself, and don't depend on your partner work your up. Her marriage was not a hindrance to her success; her partner would not allow her to pursue her dreams.
- Even when her husband was out of the country she managed to support her family, renovate her house and bought two cars. At times her husband did not send any money for their upkeep but she did manage. She met all the challenges head-on and never accepted failure.
- Wants to do events management in the near future. That's where her true passion lies.

Chipo

Personal background

- A 48 year old lady, married with three children.
- Shona by ethnic origin and a Christian by religious affiliation.
- Holds a master's degree in developmental studies.
- Programmes coordinator at a local NGO.

Personal Experience

- Faced financial constraints during her primary and secondary level
- Her male siblings had to further their education while she stayed at home
- Raped two times when she was fifteen. Had a child as a result. Did not tell anyone the time she was raped. She only told her mother when she was four months pregnant. No one believed her. It left a scar in her heart.

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- Growing up she picked up the pieces and made something out of her life.
- Went back to school when she was eighteen, her mother paid fees. Passed her O and A level and went to the teachers' college.
- Recounted that marrying an educated husband had been a big help in terms of moral support and understanding.
- The culture frowns at any woman who stays longer in school. In Chipo's case, after her Honours programme, she told her mother that she was going for her Master's degree. Her mother asked if the Masters programme was marriage. She pointed out that people will see her as a deviant if she was not married.

Natasha

Personal background

- A 38 year old participant, has one child and not married
- Ndebele by ethnic origin and a Christian by religious affiliation.
- Holds a PhD in developmental Psychology.
- Human Resources Manager.

Personal Experience

- She came from a family of four girl siblings. Was motivated by her mother to go to school.
- 'I was 5 years old when my father died. I am the last-born. So, my mother decided to take us to her father's compound, and we were not sent to school as the extended family said they did not have money for us.
- 'I had to put everything I had to get to the peak of my career so that when those people who say that girls are no children will see me in the future. It is from this situation that I got my drive to go to school".
- Did her first Psychology Honours degree at local state University.
- Got pregnant during her third year. Had to stop school for a while to nurse the baby. The father of the baby denied the pregnancy.

Emerging gender based challenges from the participants' profiles

Participant	Gender challenges	Evidence from the profile
Sharon	Being a mother, home duties lack of permission to study	Being a mother meant l had to spend time at home looking after the children. Her partner would not allow her to pursue her dreams
Chipo	Unplanned pregnancy, not being given education priority, cultural expectation of schooling time for the girl	She was raped and became pregnant, her male siblings had to further their education while she stayed at home, culture frowns over women who spend more time at school

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Natasha	Unplanned pregnancy, financial constraints for schooling	Got pregnant while at third year, nursing the child

Common gender based challenges

The core of the gender based challenges seem to be hinged on the cultural expectations and roles of the females in the society. The society still expects the women to do reproductive roles in the society looking after the children and the in-laws. When women decide to further their education and get professional careers the society frowns on such women and label them as deviants. Pursuing higher educational opportunities is still challenged by the patriarchal system that wants to continue its dominance over the females.

Sexual abuse comes out strongly as a challenge for the females in their quest for education, females are sexually abused and the current status qou is difficult for the girl child to come out and report such cases as the society will turn a deaf ear or even punish the girl child for bringing such claims in public, even the mothers of the abused children would encourage their children to suffer in silence. The cases of unwanted pregnancy and truant fathers have stood on the path of the girl child for educational attainment, as they have to drop from school to look after the fatherless children.

In times of financial constraints the families prefer to sacrifice the girl child over the boy child, with the assumption that even without education the girl child will be married off. This practice has seen many females lag behind their male counterparts in the educational opportunities.

Strategies that were used by the participants to overcome gender discrimination

Participant	**Strategies**	**Evidence from the profile**
Sharon	Balancing of the roles as a mother, following ones passions, hard working	Manages to juggle the roles, met all challenges head on and never allowed failure in life
Chipo	Remained determined, refocused herself, went against all odds	Picked up the pieces and made something from them, She went to school at the age of 18
Natasha	Sacrificed for education, had set goals.	I had to put everything to get to the peak of my career,

Common strategies for overcoming the gender based discrimination

Women who have defined and purposed their goals and worth in the midst of male patriarchy and male chauvinism are among those who have managed to acquire the educational opportunities. It is only those who have self-consciousness, self-awareness and self-esteem that excel against all odds. The concept of self -identity is useful in the success of women in this male dominated environment.

The desire and hunger to achieve ones set goals is the leading strategy in fighting against the gender discrimination. As seen in the literature review, Thatcher, Winfrey and Meyer were all women of purpose allowing nothing to stand on their way towards their set goals. A spirit of standing firm on one's beliefs is key in attaining the set goals.

At times being a deviant and going against the set societal grain can help women to get a fair share on the educational opportunities. While the society frowns on women who spend much time in school and avoids marrying, for those who want to achieve their educational goals have to take this route. Going to school even at

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odd age is one strategy that women of success have used to achieve their visions after unplanned pregnancies had deterred their educational progress.

Having the ability to balance up the wife, mother and student roles is also a skill that women who desire to go far in their educational attainments can adopt. Thatcher managed to juggle the key female roles and made great strides by becoming the first female prime minister of Britain. In this regard those that are married should also be good negotiators with their husbands as to get the needed support to get to their destinations.

While being independent and self-actualized is a requirement for those women who are aiming at rising high, it is also worth noting that receiving motivation from the significant others matters a lot in the journey towards success. Other women should also find it within themselves to push each other up, by motivating those in difficult conditions.

Personal determination to succeed, hard work, and perseverance were prominent in all the participants' stories. Of note is Chipo who managed to turn pain into power. Despite the traumatizing experience of being raped she managed to pick up the pieces, believed she could and made something out of her life. One bad experience did not define her and in that way she conquered.

"Growing up I picked up the pieces and made something out of my life. Well look at me now, I am an epitome of success", she said

"I cannot be regarded as a consumer by those around me, especially by my husband

All three participants believed in themselves and it was through that belief that made them surpass gender discrimination. Resilient, self-reliant, and being goal oriented. Can break through long lived gender stereotypes. In support of this, Sharon claims,

"Goals are achieved not because things are easy but because of great determination to make things happen". "You can suffer the pain of change or suffer remaining the way you are", she said.

A sense of purpose and a clear sense of destiny are the attributes that participants embodied.

Somehow through hard work, determination, and resilience, Natasha and her three sisters have, at least, first degree, and are all married and gainfully employed. Natasha did not have any financial support or otherwise from relatives. Instead, what she and her sisters experienced was very negative. This demonstrates that the family background while it plays a role in one's success it cannot hold those from poor backgrounds back.

CONCLUSION

Despite social, economic and religious constraints that prevent women from excelling there are some who prevail against all odds. These women understood themselves, constructed and defined themselves and pushed ahead to attain their desired ends irrespective of the existing barriers. The experiences of the three participants normalized female success, hence no one can ever question whether women are capable. The research confirmed that the women have all what it takes for achieving set goals. Women should keep on fighting for their advancements and make sure the existing pieces of legislations should be used positively by the women.

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