

Exploring College Students' Attitudes towards Female Lecturers' Competence in Teacher Education Colleges in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT Attitudes towards women are often as a result of internalized gender norms that result in gender stereotypes. The present study sought to establish college students' attitudes towards female lecturers' competence in selected teachers colleges in Zimbabwe. The study followed a descriptive survey design which utilized quantitative approaches. A stratified random sample of college students selected from the three teacher training colleges in Masvingo province participated in the study. Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire. Ordinary percentage computations were used to analyse the quantitative data. The study found that college students largely had positive attitudes towards female lecturers. The study concludes that college students' attitudes towards female lecturers did not reflect much gender biases. Recommendations were made that affirmative action policies be enhanced in a bid to promote gender equity of lecturers to positions of leadership and that more females be considered for positions as lecturers and administrators. This is essential since both male and female lecturers were of equal capability.

INTRODUCTION

The pervasiveness of beliefs regarding appropriate gender roles for males and females in society is well-documented in studies by Hughes (2001) and Lederman (2003). Such gender stereotypes result in the internalisation of specific roles for males and females and in the academic world males and females are viewed differently in terms of their abilities. There have been several studies on how students view their female lecturers and most of the studies reveal gendered perceptions of students about the lecturers. A study by Cortis and Cassar (2005) revealed that students have stereotypic attitudes towards their female lecturers and that they harbour negative views about female academics' authority, denied their competence and accorded them less prestige than males. Tope (2010) attributes the gen-

dered view of female teachers to culture and the imbedded gender stereotypes in students. Society itself has gendered views of individual members (Kimmel 2000). Students are brought up in a culture that has certain ways of viewing women and this is carried to school.

A lot of studies have been carried out to establish if professional competence was affected by gender. Boyd and Grant (2005) carried out a study to establish this link on prison officer and found that there was no significant difference in prisoners' ratings of overall competence of men and women officers. The cited study proved that competence had nothing to do with gender. Anderson and Miller (1997) also observe that in rating lecturers students normally use stereotyped lenses. This means that there are certain expectations that students hold about male and female lectures which are gender biased.

Wolfram et al. (2007) contend that there are prevalent followers' prejudices against female leaders. They further content that female leaders were at risk of receiving less professional respect from their followers than male leaders and followers with traditional gender role attitudes were prone to have comparatively little professional respect for female leaders. This shows that in institutions of higher learning students' attitudes

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towards female lectures and the respect they accord them is gender biased. Rudman and Kilian-ski (2000) actually observe that people who have internalised the traditional gender role attitudes actually object to female authority.

As already mentioned, one of the duties of lecturers in any higher education institution includes offering counselling to students. This could be group or individual counselling. Cooper (2006) reveals that students' preference of counsellors can be sex-determined. They found in a study on counsellor preference that female students preferred female counsellors and so male students preferred male counsellors. The same findings were confirmed in a similar study by Quinna and Chana (2009). This shows that due to gendered views, male students may not accept counselling from female lecturers and may harbour gendered views even when it came to aspects such as lecture presentation.

In a study on students' perceptions about their lecturers, Carson (2001) asserts that there are gender schemas which are hypotheses about what it means to be a male or a female and such schemas when applied to professional competence often over-value men and under-value women. Allan (2004: 276) observes that;

Gender norms are the expectations society holds for masculine and feminine behaviour, and which serve to limit what is and is not considered to be appropriate roles and behaviours for men and women.

On a similar note, Carson (2001) reiterates that women are treated differently because of the tendency to view them as clerical administrators rather than lecturers. What is clear, here, is that it is these societal expectations internalised through socialisations that make people hold certain views about men and women in terms of their abilities concerning work.

A study by Brian et al. (2007:37) revealed gender dynamics when it came to the preference of male and female professors. The study established that "female professors are evaluated differently by students than are male professors in aspects such as teaching styles and perceptual biases" and also that males were rated higher than females when it came to effectiveness. Similar results were obtained by Carson (2001) who found that male lecturers were automatically given respect and intellectual credibility while female lecturers had to work extra hard to prove their credibility. In yet another study, Bachen et al.

(1999) found that male students were also most likely to describe their worst female professors in terms of poor classroom interactions, especially closed-mindedness. Bachen et al. 1999 found that female students rated female lecturers highly and male lecturers comparatively lower. This explains the gendered assessment of lecturers by students. Anderson and Miller (1997) advise that gender bias in students' evaluation of lecturers' teaching can be potentially damaging.

As professionals in the higher education sector, female lecturers are expected to exhibit good and effective leadership qualities. Studies have shown that men are seen as better leaders than women (Cortis and Cassar 2006; Carli et al. 2001; Chipunza 2003; Carson 2001). In instances where female leaders are seen as strict and authoritarian, they are viewed as exhibiting unfeminine leadership traits. The feminine characteristics expected of a female leader are warmth, tolerance and kindness (Sikdar and Mitra 2008; Carli et al. 2001; Court in Collard and Reynolds 2005). In studies that have been carried out to rate female lectures' leadership qualities, students have often rated them lowly. This low rating is compared to higher rating for their male counterparts. This suggests the gendered view of women as leaders in which gender stereotypes play a role of shaping people's views of women as playing gender expected roles nurtured through socialisation. On aspirations to occupy top leadership positions, Chabaya et al. (2009) found that women in their teaching profession lacked such aspiration. Some of the hindrances included family commitments and fear of taking up the challenge of leadership in a male-dominated society.

One of the important tasks of a lecturer in a teacher education college is to assess students. This assessment takes form of assignments, tests, examinations and teaching practice supervision. Honest and fair assessment is required in any form of assessment. Radda (2009) observes that it is expected of all lecturers in dealing with students to be fair, objective and helpful. Assessment in any form should be done objectively without prejudicing the student's efforts. Unfair assessment is normally associated with male lectures who may favour female students in exchange of sexual favours (Zindi 1994; Radda 2009). While it may not be completely ruled out, it is uncommon for female lecturers to seek sexual favours from male students. This entire unfair

assessment hinges on sexual harassment. Joubert et al. (2010) also found that sexual harassment policies may be in existence in universities but there is a problem in the implementation hence sexual harassment may be prevalent. In Kenyan universities Muiruri and Owuor (2006) report of rampant sex-for marks scandals suggesting that student assessment could be unfairly done as male lecturers take advantage of female students.

Goal of the Study

The study sought to establish college students attitudes towards female lecturers by specifically addressing the question; 'What are the attitudes of college students towards female lecturers in Masvingo Region Teacher Education Colleges?'

METHODOLOGY

Research Design The study was a descriptive survey of views of students drawn from the three Teacher Education Colleges in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. The study employed the quantitative methodology. Quantitative data analysis and interpretation is primarily deductive, a matter of proving or disproving an assertion developed from a general statement. In this present study quantitative data in the form of percentage computations were sought to establish the kind of attitudes students had towards their female lectures

Population The population for this study was made up of all the student population of 1 122 students from the three Masvingo Teacher Education Colleges.

Sample For the purpose of this study, 10% of the student population of 1 122 was used, that is, 112 students. It was necessary to limit the number of respondents for management and cost

factors. This was not a sponsored study and the researchers had to rely on their own resources which were limited. The researchers used stratified random sampling. This was adopted so as to ensure representation of all strata within the population. Of the 112 students chosen, the researchers calculated the gender proportion of each college in relation to the entire male/female student population. The proportion obtained was then used to calculate a number of respondents as indicated on Table 1.

Data Management and Processing Questionnaires with both closed and open ended questions were used as data gathering instruments. The questionnaires were physically administered to participating students. Group administration and collection of the questionnaires was done and this ensured a 100% response rate. Percentage computations were used to quantify responses on the issues sought in the study.

Ethical Issues

The researchers were responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of the participants in the study and meeting all consideration of the study. Smith (2003) and Sales and Folkman (2000) contend that ethics are very critical in social science research that deals with human beings as research participants. The following ethical issues were addressed; confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and withdrawal, informed consent, harm and research permission.

Confidentiality: The researchers explained to the participants in the study that the information supplied was to be treated in utmost confidentiality. They would be asked not to write their names on the questionnaires and this was done in view of the need to protect confidentiality of data and participants' privacy.

Table 1: The sample of student teachers according to college and sex

College	No. of students per college		Proportion of each college to the population		No. of students sampled per college		Total number of students in sample
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	
X	201	224	37.5	38.2	20	22	42
Y	103	129	19.2	22.0	11	13	24
Z	232	233	43.3	39.8	23	23	46
Total	536	586	100	100	54	58	112

Anonymity: The researchers also explained to participants that by not writing names on the questionnaire all the responses would be protected and no one would know who provided the responses.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: The conditions of participation were clarified to participants and that they participated voluntarily and were free to withdraw from the study at any stage should they feel they wanted to do so for any reason. Participants were assured of their voluntary participation and right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Informed Consent: The researchers sought for informed consent from participants in the study. A consent form was designed and participants were asked to complete after the purpose of the study and conditions of participation were explained to them. All participants were adults and they completed their own consent form.

Harm: The researchers explained to participants that their participation in the study would not cause any harm, discomfort or danger to them in any way.

Research Permission: Permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the College authorities. It was only after the granting of explicit and written permission that the researchers proceeded with data collection.

RESULTS

The results are presented according to the four foci areas namely professional competence, counselling of students, lecture presentation and leadership.

Professional Competence

Students' views were sought on female lecturers' knowledge, ability and proficiency in areas such as assessment of examinations, teaching practice, assignments, counselling, lecture presentation and leadership qualities. It should be noted that from the analysis made, the responses by both male and female students were not gender specific that is, there was no common trend from the sexes to align a response to a specific gender. The responses given were almost similar. As a result, analysis was not done according to gender.

Rating females in terms of subject content knowledgeability, sixty-five respondents (58%)

which is the majority, said that both male and female lecturers are equally knowledgeable. When it came to teaching practice supervision, most students (49%) said that female lecturers are better and more thorough than males while a few (18.8%) viewed male lecturers as more thorough with the remaining (32.1%) suggesting that both male and female lecturers were equally thorough. These results show that female lecturers are highly rated by most students in the aspect in question. Reasons given for the above view were that women are more strict and critical since they want work to be done up to standard. Others felt that women are better since they are not sex biased; they do not ask for sexual favours from students.

Counselling of Students

Respondents indicated their preferences in terms of general assessment and counselling. While 54 (48.2%) did not mind being supervised by either males or females, 34(30.4%) preferred male lecturers while 24 (21.4%) would go for female lecturers. Reasons given for supporting both sexes were that both males and females are equally competent and professional. Other reasons were that the outcome of every assessment depended on an individual lecturer, on the student's effort and attitudes and not on the sex of the lecturer.

Respondents were asked to indicate their choice as far as confiding in lecturers is concerned. A few 38 (33.9) did not mind confiding in either males or females giving reasons that the nature of the problem determined who to approach and that all lecturers were equally capable of offering good advice. Thirty-four respondents (30.4%) opted for female lecturers because they thought these were more sympathetic and acted like mothers.

Lecture Presentation

Commenting on lecture preparedness, 58(51.3%) indicated both male and female lecturers come prepared for lecturers. There were responses of twenty-eight (24.8%) in favour of women against ten (8.9%) in favour of men. This shows that females are rated as better than males in lecture preparedness when they were asked to choose between these two. Students who said female lecturers came better prepared argued that

females made good presentations which were easy to follow unlike males whom they said sometimes engaged in unnecessary discussions so as to while up time.

Students were asked to indicate who better presents lectures between males and females. Fifteen (13.3%) viewed females as better. Sixteen (14.2%) thought males were better. Eighty-two (72.6%) said there was no difference in lecture presentation between male and female lecturers. These statistics show that both male and female lecturers are rated almost equally by their students in lecture presentation.

Leadership

Respondents also indicated posts of responsibility best suited for female lecturers. Table 2 shows the responses given by students. The highest post of responsibility in colleges is that of principal. The statistics as indicated above shows that the largest no of respondents believe that female lecturers qualify to be principals of colleges. This could be an indication that females are regarded as capable of leading. This finding contradicts that made by Schein (1994) whose survey in the United State of America revealed that in organisations, only men were regarded by society as capable of being managers or leaders. Justifications given for thinking that female lecturers could occupy posts of leadership such as those given above were that females are more considerate. Other reasons were that females are good at organising and are strict but fair.

Table 2: Students' views on posts of responsibility best suitable for female lecturers

<i>Post</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Principal	39	34.8
Vice Principal	17	15.2
Head of Department	29	25.9
Lecturer in Charge	18	16.1
None of these	9	8.0
Total	112	100.0

Lastly, respondents said there had to be equity between males and females as far as distribution of posts of leadership is concerned. Respondents who thought that leadership posts were not suitable for females reasoned that fe-

males lacked leadership ability, need posts with fewer commitments, tend to be dictatorial and abuse other females. Females were also seen as being emotionally, mentally and physically feeble and unable to solve problems. In the United States of America, Fagenson and Jackson (1993) found in their study that 80% of Chief Education Officers claimed that stereotyping and preconceptions of women as managers were central to their inability to get top jobs in their organisations.

DISCUSSION

It emerged from the study that female lecturers were rated highly in professional competence. These findings contradict observations (Fandt et al. 1990; Carson 2001) that female professors and female lecturers respectively were more likely to be negatively evaluated by students than were male professors. The findings confirm findings in a study by Boyd and Grant (2005) that competence was not sex-determined. A study by Zindi (1994) in Zimbabwe's Teacher Education Colleges revealed that male lecturers asked for sexual favours from female students, sometimes even sexually harassing them. Students further indicated that female lecturers understood students better. However, those who viewed both male and female lecturers as equally capable said that thoroughness depended on the skills, knowledge and experience of the lecturer.

The study also found that students tolerated and accepted female lectures as capable professionals. These findings contradict observations made by Fandt et al. (1990) who showed that students could be tolerant of their female professors only if the professors met gender appropriate expectations. Those students who opted to be supervised by male lecturers said that males were fair and were not strict and thorough. Those who preferred females argued that these were more motherly. This confirms studies (Valian 1999; Coleman 2007; Madden 2005; Fulcher and Scott 2003; Kanyoro 2006) which show that attitudes towards females were dependent on internalised gender schemas. Motherliness is an attribute normally associated with women. Reasons given for not wanting female lecturers were that some were proud and sometimes jealousy of female students.

It further emerged from the study that male students preferred counselling services provided by males whereas females also wanted to be counselled by female lecturers. Such findings are consistent with Rich et al.'s (1989) findings that students' preference of counsellors can be sex-determined. Those who chose to confide in males 33 (29.5%) thought that males were more understanding and considerate than females. Some felt that females could not keep secrets. This looks like it is one of those stereotypes whereby women are looked at and labeled with gendered and stereotypic lenses. It is clear that there are certain attributes which are being attached to women as a group reinforcing "the feminine as the monolithic" (Collard and Reynolds 2005).

The revelation in the study that female lectures were suitable to hold positions of leadership in the colleges is consistent with Mugweni et al. (2011) who found that women in leadership were equally capable or even superior to males. The above findings, however, contradict those by the ILEA Report (1985) in Askew and Rose (1988) in which women teachers lamented that they were lowly rated by students compared to male teachers. Delamont (1990) is of the view that women's primary role is viewed by society as that of carer and mother and that career roles came second. The revelation in the study that students viewed female lectures as lacking authority as leaders when compared to their male counterparts further buttresses claims abound in literature that women are looked down upon as leaders (Cortis and Cassar 2006; Chabaya et al. 2009).

On the issue of assessment, students generally believed that honest and fair assessment was not sex-related. Respondents claimed it depended on individual lecturers regardless of their sex. This finding is consistent with Radda's (2009) assertion that it is expected of all lecturers in dealing with students to be fair, objective and helpful. The findings are also inconsistent with reports by Muiruri and Owuor (2006) of rampant corruption in Kenyan universities where the sex for marks scandal was euphemistically called the sexually transmitted grades.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that;

1. Students viewed their female lectures as equally competent professionally in terms of lecture preparation and lecture delivery.

2. Female lectures were also viewed as capable of holding any position of leadership in the colleges but were perceived as having less authority than their male counterparts.
3. Students had sex-related preferences to counsellors and this was as a result of gender stereotypes on how males and females would behave in counselling situations.
4. Honest and fair assessment of students is not gender-based and the way students were assessed depended in individual lectures regardless of their sex.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insights gained from this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. That since female lecturers are positively viewed by students, they be given more posts of leadership in colleges.
2. The affirmative action approach to promotions and entry qualifications in tertiary institutions which was put in place in education as a measure to redress imbalances caused by gender inequalities should be strengthened and that more females be considered for positions as lecturers and leaders since they are equally capable.
3. Colleges, schools and universities should endeavour to have gender sensitive programmes in the form of staff development and workshops for students, teachers and lecturers to ensure that duties at the work place were not distributed according to sex. While students' opinion is that female lecturers hold less authority than male lecturers hold less authority than male lecturers, it would be necessary for further studies to determine:
 - i) Whether in reality women in leadership posts do have less authority.
 - ii) The challenges that women who are already in positions of leadership encounter in the education sector.

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