

## **Do Women Have to ‘Grow Muscles’ in Order to Successfully Manage Schools? Evidence from Some South African Female School Principals**

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**ABSTRACT** The study reports on women principals’ management experiences in four schools. Using a feminist lens and school management theories, this paper discusses gender-based experiences of women school principals, and the implications of these for effective management of schools. The inductive analysis offered makes use of data generated from semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis with four women school principals. It reveals that women principals experienced being caught in the middle of having to balance domestic chores (being mothers and wives) and work responsibility (as school principals). It also denotes pervasive gender stereotypes that depict women as care-givers and nurturers, and therefore not suited for management positions. These factors invoked a paradoxical predicament wherein women principals were perpetually torn between asserting their identity as women (feminine) and adopting a masculine attitude (growing muscles) in order to cope with a male orientated field of school management. The conclusion provides strategies on how women principals could be supported in order to enhance their effectiveness in managing schools in South Africa. The researchers recommend that women school principals desist from seeking to ‘grow muscles’. Instead they should seek to grow in who they really are: collaborative, caring, emotionally connected and vigilant towards meeting organisational goals.