

## **The Prospects and Challenges of Women in Leadership Positions. A Case Study of Thulamela Municipality**

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### **Abstract**

*Language has multifaceted functions. Scholars consider language as form of communication where the communicator's aim is to educate, inform and call names. It is a system of human expression by means of words. It is also a system of signs, movements used to express meaning or feelings with a particular style or manner of expression. Language may be used as a tool for emancipation. It can also be used to denote terminologies and expressions used in ridiculing women in power position. After 1994, the Republic of South African government has been appointing women folks in higher posts of leadership than before. These women encounter prospects and challenges in government institutions such as Municipality, Provincial and National Government. These experiences differ drastically from the indigenous lives of women before the dawn of democratic dispensation. The paper seeks to investigate the prospects and challenges of indigenous language as a tool of ridiculing women in leadership positions in the Thulamela Municipality Area. To accomplish this endeavour, the researchers will use the qualitative methods.*

### **1. Introduction**

Many authors define the terms that they use in their articles. The Longman *Dictionary Contemporary English* (1985: 882) defines 'prospects' as "something happening, which is expected or considered probable (soon), and of which the idea remains in mind", while 'challenge' is defined as "an invitation to compete in a fight, match. Slater (1992) defines a prospect as:

'A possibility or a wide view', while a challenge is defined as, 'something which is difficult to do but exciting to try'. Slater (1992:79)

Deducing from the preceding definitions, the discussion will be on the contribution of women and the problems they encounter in the delivery of services in their jobs at the Thulamela Municipality.

### **2. Prospects of women in the leadership positions**

The dawn of democracy in South Africa has brought many prospects and challenges for women. Previously women were not considered for leadership positions in the community and in the family, hence the adage which says "*Khuhu ya phambo a i imbi mutsho*, loosely translated, it means women have no chance or space in the initiation of a discussion in the family.

Since 1994, the Government has been appointing women to leadership positions so that women could also contribute positively in the economy of the country. Although the prospects were positive, one would find few women in many positions, even in leadership positions.

### **3. Prospects of women folks**

Women as people are acceptable to all people of all stages of society. Many youths, elderly people and middle aged people accept them when they raise issues. It is because they understand the conditions of youth, middle aged and elderly people well.

When the local municipalities came into being, women were also appointed into leadership, as mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996). Even though the prospects are good, there are also challenges facing them.

#### **4. *How the Community sees women folks***

The community often considers women as people who do domestic work, procrastinate or bear and raising children. The committee also know that if women are doing their work, they should be cleaning the surroundings, cleaning the offices and making tea for officers working in the offices only. Men often believe that they are superior to women, e.g. in the Venda community most of the chiefs are men and most of the headmen are men too. There are three headwomen in the entire Venda. Their area of jurisdiction are Tshaulu tsha ha Bohwana, Duthuni Tshiendeulu and Vondwe. This trend is noticeable in our country's highest position, where presidents have always been men. Communities often assume that leadership posts should be occupied by men.

However, times have changed and more and more women are educated. People should therefore accept that can be leaders. They have professions in various fields. Therefore, they deserve to be recognised by being appointed to big portfolios. This is because they can take responsibilities just like men. They can be in charge and be accountable to their work. They can also make sure that their subordinates do their work.

#### **5. *The dawn of democracy***

Since 1994, when South Africa attained democracy, women have been regarded as equal to men. They have equal representation in all spheres of life. Before 1994, most management posts in schools were manned by men; example principals, vice-principals and head of departments. However, since 1994 all big portfolios or posts have also been given to women. This is because women also have the ability to handle functions mandated by big posts in a responsible manner. They also know how to manage schools. When they hold these portfolios, one finds that they are efficient.

#### **6. *Women's participation in Tshikona dance***

Before 1994 the tshikona dance was performed by men and boys among the Vhavenḁa. However, after 1994 women and girls started participating in the dance. They perform it just like men and boys. However, they are ridiculed and undermined for doing a men's dance sometimes.

#### **7. *Performing Circumcision duties***

Before democracy, men and boys were taken to the bushes to be circumcised during the winter months. Since the dawn of democracy many women took up medical professions in hospitals. This means many women qualify to hold medical posts which include the responsibility to do circumcision for men and boys. Nowadays, women are also used to circumcise boys and men in the hospitals. In other words, boys no longer need to be sent to the bushes for circumcision. Rather can be sent to the hospitals to be circumcised by doctors, either male or female, who are qualified to do so.

This is contrary to how it was done prior to 1994, when this process was done by men and women were not allowed near initiation schools. This health function leads to a situation where some women nurses open private clinics where they render services such as circumcision on young boys.

#### **8. *Membership in Civic Associations (SANCO)***

One also finds that most executive positions within the Civic Association under SANCO are held by men for example, in Thohoyandou Block F, the Executive Committee (SANCO) consists of five women and one man. One man occupies the Deputy- Secretary Post. It is no longer a position reserved for a woman. Although women are in the majority, some people ridicule them, saying that the organisation represents the aspirations of women. However, the reason is that women believe in team work. Many women have joined Civic Associations in large numbers. Another thing, many men who join a Civic Association do not contribute towards its development. Women on the other hand, do so because men do not want to listen to another man or woman. They even say that they do not want to be led by another presplit alone an executive member of a Civic Association. Men are proud beings who do not like to accept challenges. They do not like to be led by other persons. Instead, they want to lead others.

## 9. Membership in Churches

Before democracy pastors in the churches were exclusively men. Women were also not allowed to preach at a church service. However, main stream churches as well as contemporary ones now allow women to preach. Women can now also establish their own churches, and have anointing powers of healing and chasing away demons.

## 10. Challenges facing women in leadership positions

### 10.1 Place of employment

Although the government has elevated the status of women to that of man, they are not widely in society recognised. When in leadership in the municipality, for example, they are called names. Since they are known to do babysitting work, cooking at home, looking after the elderly people, the community looks at as being good in that only. They do not acknowledge their talent in the mainstream workplace.

Women contribute immensely to the development of our society. They are responsible for keeping the budget of the family safe. They do not embezzle money, like is the case in the present government. The ANC-led government in losing millions of rands in tender business. The incidence of women in such corruption is also minimal.

## 11. Women's dominance in churches

Men do not like to attend churches. One finds more women than men who are members of any church. Men do not want to be led in Christianity with other people, let alone by women. Men do not often consider not women as responsible people who can contribute positively towards others' lives.

## 12. Establishment of burial societies

Slater (1992:80) defines a society as *a club or group of people who meet because they share the same interest*. Women establish burial societies where they meet regularly to make collections for the burial of family members. At present in the Thulamela Municipality, 90% of the existing burial societies were established by women. Those that were established by men are mostly defunct because of arguments among members of the societies. Although women are successful in establishing these institutions, few men acknowledge this. Societies are now seen as women institutions, rendering good services to the communities in the Thulamela Municipality. However, few men acknowledge this feat.

## 13. Men's stereotypes

When a young girl grows up, she undergoes a process of socialisation. Womack (1998:23) defines socialisation as,

*'the process of transmitting culture from one generation to the next'*

Williams (1983:463) defines socialisation 'as the process of transmission of human culture'

De Witt and Booysen (1994:02), quoting Chetwyn and Harnett (1978:18),

*'Socialisation is the transmission of conduct, roles, attitudes and values from generations to the other'.*

Even after completing socialisation, most men still consider the women to be just like were in childhood. In this way, men stereotype women and disregard the change during the process of socialisation. In each leadership post at church, school, social institutions etc, women are considered to be all the same. This attitude by men hinders the progress of women. However; Ferrante (2000:120) believes that socialisation changes a woman because it is,

*A process by which people develop their human capacities and acquire unique personality and identity and by which culture is passed from generations to generations.*

The community believes that only men change when they grow up. However, it is true of women too. The attitudes and stereotypes of men, seeing women as weak individuals could take years to change. Whereas to them they would be seeing failures and not successes in her life. The stereotype of seeing women as failures should be terminated.

During the dawn of democracy women were considered to be like minors because they could not enter into contracts without their husbands. This state of affairs has changed. However, the legacy still lives on in the mindsets of some people. In addition, there are also religions that still do not allow women to go to church. The mindset still has not changed.

#### **14. Attitudes towards Professions**

In the olden days, Vhavenḡa girls were not allowed to attend formal schools for fear that they might lose their Tshivenda customs. However, later they were allowed to do so. But even when they did attend schools, there were professions which were considered out of bounds for females. Most females would follow teaching and nursing. This is supported by Wood (2007:54) when he says that:

*Women are still regarded as caretakers, and that are expected to provide most of the care for infants, elderly relatives, and others who are sick or disabled*

Goodman (1992:163) emphasises that:

*---many women find themselves having to do most of the childcare, cooking, and housework as well as their outside job*

Later on during the self governing rule/ state females could join the police force. Due to the establishment of vocational schools, many professions, opened up for females. At present women have joined professions that were previously reserved for males such as engineering, bricklaying, carpentering and motor mechanics.

However, there is scarcity of females who enter these professions. In the Thulamela Municipality, there is no female civil, mechanical and chemical engineers. On the contrary, there are many teachers and nurses in the municipality. The lack of females in the engineering professions is because of the attitudes of the community towards females.

Also the tendency within the Thulamela Municipality to regard engineering still persists as male professions.

#### **15. Conclusion**

Deducing from the above discussion one can conclude that the dawn of democracy has brought both positive prospects and negative challenges for our women folks. The prospects and challenges encountered by women and men have brought enormous contribution to people's lives in South Africa. Without the contribution of women, South African communities would not be the same. Throughout their hardship, women have changed peoples' lives tremendously.

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