

Chapter 12

Leadership as a Contested Terrain in Local Government: A Pre-and Post Democratic View on Women Leadership

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Introduction

Traditional leadership has been thriving on male leadership for a long time, a practice that has asserted male dominance over women. Dodo (2013) argues that men have dominated traditional leadership systems since time immemorial. Nevertheless, some traditional societies argued that there has been female leadership, even though most women worked behind the scenes because of male dominance and prejudices. Thus, traditional leadership consists of kings, chiefs and headmen who control all forms of human behaviour, resources, and cultural practices. Rapatsa (2015) agrees that traditional leadership is vested in kings, chiefs and headmen who were elevated pre-democracy to the status above that of ordinary citizens. The leadership of kings, chiefs and headmen was not controlled by formal legislation and the chiefs began to be used to advance the interests of colonisers and later of the apartheid regime, who promoted ethnicity that divided society. South African History Online (2024) states that traditional leadership in the pre-colonial era, 1880-1893, provided political, societal, economic, cultural, and religious guidance to their communities. A paradigm shift occurred when traditional leaders began to depend on the colonial government for resources and power, and the colonial government began to give traditional leaders orders that promoted colonial strategies and objectives.

Rapatsa (2015) states that the kings and chiefs served apartheid excellently by disregarding human rights and exploiting the citizens. However, the practice has now changed in a democratic society because of Chapter 2, the 'Bill of Rights', sub-section (9) of the Constitution of South Africa (1996), which stipulates that 'everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law', an element that was foreign to African chieftaincy. Most traditional leaders experienced challenges emanating from a transition from a traditional rule to democratic rule, especially because some of their powers were curtailed, a practice that brought many contestations. The contestations revolved around supremacy, power and control of resources. Mathonsi and Sithole (2017) observe that a transition from traditional rule to democracy has caused the incompatibility of the two governance systems since the role and function of traditional leaders is blurred in the day-to-day functions of the municipalities. The power and jurisdiction contestations that have result have affected delivery of services in the local government.

Delivery of services in local government is a general problem in South Africa and it affects both citizens and leaders. It should however be noted that women in South African local municipalities are a minority, and as a result are greatly affected service delivery challenges. This is because most women leaders are likely to be placed in environments that are not supportive. Phala (2011) contends that women in local government are not fully supported, although placed in challenging environments; he argues that government should consider the fact that women were marginalised for a long time. Furthermore, local government politics together with cultural prejudice makes it difficult for women to be successful in their leadership positions.

Mishra (2018) argues that local government politics makes it difficult for women to exercise their authority since the men that create extra barriers for women to overcome shape local government politics. Governments are often expressed in masculinity, a social dynamic that excludes women and discards them as effective leaders. Men need to be educated to accept women as their equals in all spheres of life.

When women are in leadership positions in local government, they are likely to advance the interest of women in the areas of water supply, infrastructure development, housing and property ownership. Mishra (2018) maintains that female political leaders prioritise public goods that are of major concern to women. The main concerns of women, especially in the rural areas, are about water, infrastructure, sanitation, roads, education and health. In as much as the latter challenges affect leaders and communities equally, this chapter will be prudent to focus on the challenges in relation to women leadership.

Aim of the Study

Dudovsky (2022) stipulates that a research aim should clearly state what has to be achieved at the end of the research process. The aim of this research is to investigate the leadership contestations that affect women in the local government terrain.

Objectives

The research objectives specify the actions that will be undertaken to actualise the research aim (Dudovsky, 2022). In this research these were:

- to determine the barriers that affect women leadership in local government.
- to investigate the effectiveness of the legislative framework that governs the interface between traditional leadership and democratically elected leadership.