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Perceptions About Women's Underrepresentation in Senior Leadership in the Zambia Police Service

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction and objective. Women remain underrepresented in senior leadership in the Zambia Police Service (ZPS), despite institutional commitments to gender equality. This study examined the extent of women's underrepresentation, factors shaping their progression, institutional barriers and the perceived implications for leadership effectiveness.

Methods. A mixed-methods case-study design was used. The quantitative component involved 393 police officers, with the sample calculated from an estimated population of 22,000 using Israel's finite-population formula. The qualitative component comprised four focus group discussions (FGDs). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, an FGD guide and institutional document review. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively and qualitative material thematically. Interpretation was guided by Feminist Organisational Theory and Gender Role Theory.

Results. Administrative records showed that women constituted 361 of 1,641 officers across the listed senior ranks (22.0%). Representation was 11.5% at Commissioner level and 12.8% at Senior Assistant Commissioner level. Women accounted for 47 of 246 Officers in Charge (19.1%). Participants identified perceived barriers including opaque promotion practices, unequal access to operational command and specialist training, limited mentoring, informal networks, favouritism, gender stereotypes, male-dominated organisational culture and weaknesses in policy implementation. Participants perceived that limited representation could narrow the perspectives present in senior decision-making; this was not an independently measured effect on police performance.

Recommendations and conclusion. The study recommends transparent promotion and appointment procedures, equitable access to career-building assignments and training, structured mentoring and coaching, gender-disaggregated monitoring and stronger accountability for gender-policy implementation. Women's underrepresentation in ZPS senior leadership is both numerical and institutional, requiring coordinated organisational reform and leadership development.

KEYWORDS: women in policing; women's underrepresentation; senior leadership; gender equality; career progression; Zambia Police Service

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in policing has expanded internationally, yet their representation in senior command has not always kept pace with recruitment and workforce growth. Police organisations have traditionally operated through hierarchical command structures and occupational expectations that associate authority, operational competence and availability with masculine norms. Women have historically been channelled into roles involving administration, victim support and work with women and children. Although these functions are essential, unequal access to operational assignments and specialist experience may restrict opportunities for officers to demonstrate readiness for senior leadership (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000; Silvestri, 2017; Alexander and Charman, 2024).

Research on women in policing increasingly distinguishes between entry into the service and progression through its leadership structures. Career advancement can be shaped by access to specialist training, operational exposure, acting appointments, mentoring, sponsorship and professional networks. These opportunities influence the experience and visibility that may be considered in promotion and appointment decisions (Haake, 2018; Lavender and Todak, 2022; Todak, 2023).

In Zambia, the Zambia Police Service (ZPS) has made formal commitments to gender equality, including the Gender Equality and Workplace Policy launched in 2023. Such commitments provide an institutional basis for promoting women's participation and advancement. However, the existence of a policy does not, by itself, establish that women have equal access to promotion, training, deployment or command appointments. The implementation of commitments within everyday organisational practices therefore warrants examination (Republic of Zambia, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

This study examined women's underrepresentation in senior leadership in the ZPS, with particular attention to Zambia Police Headquarters and selected operational and training settings. It was guided by four objectives: to explore the nature and extent of women's underrepresentation in senior leadership; examine factors shaping women's progression into leadership; establish the causes of underrepresentation; and identify measures for addressing the problem. The study also considered participants' perceptions of the implications of women's representation for leadership effectiveness, decision-making and institutional responsiveness.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Women's underrepresentation refers to the comparatively limited presence of women in senior leadership and command positions within the Zambia Police Service, particularly in relation to their representation in the wider officer establishment. Senior leadership refers to senior ranks and positions involving strategic direction, command, supervision and institutional decision-making. Leadership effectiveness refers to the capacity to provide direction, make and implement decisions, manage personnel and resources, uphold professional standards and support institutional objectives. Career progression refers to movement through ranks and leadership responsibilities, including access to training, operational assignments, acting appointments and promotion. These definitions are applied within the context of this study and do not imply that gender alone determines leadership capability or performance.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by two complementary perspectives: Feminist Organisational Theory and Gender Role Theory. The theories were selected because they provide a focused basis for examining how organisational arrangements and socially constructed expectations may influence women's opportunities to progress into senior leadership. They informed interpretation of the findings rather than serving as statistical models or proof that any particular decision was discriminatory.

3.1 Feminist Organisational Theory

Feminist Organisational Theory, particularly Acker's (1990) account of gendered organisations, argues that organisations are not necessarily gender-neutral. Their structures, routines, job expectations, informal practices and systems of recognition may reproduce gender inequalities, even where formal rules appear neutral. The theory directs attention to how authority is distributed, which forms of experience are valued, who gains access to influential networks and how organisational norms define the ideal worker and leader. In the ZPS context, this perspective is relevant to examining access to operational command, specialist training, acting appointments, promotion processes and senior decision-making. It also supports analysis of the relationship between formal gender-equality commitments and their implementation in everyday institutional practice. The theory does not presume that all organisational requirements are discriminatory; rather, it raises questions about whether opportunities and criteria are transparent, consistently applied and equally accessible.

3.2 Gender Role Theory

Gender Role Theory explains how socially constructed expectations about appropriate behaviours and responsibilities for women and men may shape workplace interactions and judgements about leadership suitability. Eagly (1987) explains that gender roles influence expectations about behaviour, while role-congruity research shows how perceived mismatches between stereotypes associated with women and expectations associated with leadership can contribute to prejudice towards women leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

This perspective is relevant to the study because police leadership is often associated with authority, command presence, operational availability and decisiveness. Where these qualities are interpreted through gender stereotypes, women officers may face additional scrutiny or may be judged differently for similar leadership behaviours. Gender Role Theory therefore provides a basis for interpreting participants' accounts of stereotypes, assumptions about women's suitability for command and the recognition of women's leadership capabilities.

Taken together, the two theories allow the study to examine both organisational processes and the gender expectations that may operate within them. Feminist Organisational Theory focuses attention on structures, routines and institutional power, while Gender Role Theory helps explain how social expectations may shape perceptions of leadership and career suitability. Their combined use provides a focused interpretive framework for understanding the reported barriers to women's progression in the ZPS.

IV. SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature identifies a persistent distinction between women's entry into policing and their progression into senior command. Research describes occupational segregation and gendered workplace cultures that may limit access to operational experience, specialist roles and influential networks. These factors can affect the opportunities through which officers build professional visibility and demonstrate readiness for leadership (Heidensohn, 1992; Rabe-Hemp, 2018; Haake, 2018).

Studies further suggest that promotion systems may appear neutral while rewarding experience, assignments and professional relationships that are not equally accessible to all officers. Informal expectations about availability, command authority and

leadership style may also influence how women's competence is recognised (Silvestri, 2017; Alexander and Charman, 2024; Todak, 2023). Gender Role Theory is relevant to this literature because it explains how stereotypes about appropriate behaviour may affect judgements of women leaders, while Feminist Organisational Theory directs attention to the organisational practices through which unequal opportunities may be reproduced.

Mentoring, coaching and sponsorship can support career development, but they are unlikely to resolve structural barriers where promotion criteria, assignment practices and accountability remain opaque (Lavender and Todak, 2022). African and Zambian institutional contexts must be examined on their own terms rather than assuming that findings from other jurisdictions apply uniformly. The present study contributes a case-based examination of rank representation, career opportunities and officers' experiences within the ZPS, including the relationship between formal gender commitments and reported workplace practice.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods case-study design with descriptive quantitative and exploratory qualitative components. An interpretivist and constructivist orientation informed the examination of officers' experiences and perceptions, while quantitative data were used to describe patterns in respondents' characteristics, reported career opportunities and institutional barriers. The Zambia Police Service constituted the institutional case.

5.1 Study setting and population

The study covered Zambia Police Headquarters in Lusaka, Kamfinsa School of Public Order and Maintenance, Airport Division and Lilayi Police Training College. These settings provided institutional, operational and training perspectives on leadership, promotion and gender-related practices. The target population comprised approximately 22,000 officers in the ZPS.

5.2 Sample size and sampling

The quantitative sample comprised 393 police officers. The sample size was calculated from the estimated population of approximately 22,000 using Israel's (1992) finite-population formula at 5% precision. The study describes the use of stratified random sampling across relevant categories, including gender, rank and institutional function. The qualitative component comprised four FGDs. Participants for the FGDs were selected purposively based on relevant institutional knowledge and experience. The 393 questionnaire respondents and FGD participants are distinct components of the study and should not be combined into a single sample count.

5.3 Data collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, an FGD guide and an institutional document-review checklist. The questionnaire covered professional background, promotion opportunities, access to training, leadership preparation, organisational culture and gender-related barriers. The FGDs explored career progression, leadership expectations, promotion procedures and possible institutional improvements. Relevant policies, promotion guidance, training frameworks and institutional reports were reviewed where accessible.

5.4 Data analysis and ethical considerations

Quantitative data were checked, coded and analysed using SPSS. Frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulations were used to summarise respondent characteristics and examine patterns in promotion, training and leadership opportunities. Qualitative FGD material was organised and thematically analysed using NVivo. Quantitative, qualitative and documentary findings were compared during interpretation. Research rigour was supported through systematic analysis and triangulation. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, exclusion of unnecessary personal identifiers and attention to the sensitivity of rank relationships. The design does not establish causal relationships, and the FGDs were not intended to provide statistically representative estimates.

VI. SUMMARY OF DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The findings drew on structured questionnaire responses from 393 officers, four FGDs, senior-rank administrative records covering 1,641 officers, records for 246 Officers in Charge and institutional documents. The administrative data showed that women constituted 361 of the 1,641 officers across the listed senior ranks, representing 22.0%. Representation differed by rank and was lowest in some of the highest command categories.

TABLE I. WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE SENIOR-RANK RECORDS

Rank	Women	Total	Women (%)
Commissioner	3	26	11.5
Deputy Commissioner	6	33	18.2

Senior Assistant Commissioner	6	47	12.8
Assistant Commissioner	34	142	23.9
Senior Superintendent	48	216	22.2
Superintendent	67	328	20.4
Assistant Superintendent	197	849	23.2
Total	**361**	**1,641**	**22.0**

Source: Administrative records supplied for the study.

Among the 246 Officers in Charge records, 47 were women (19.1%). The source records also report that no women were listed in the Officers in Charge positions for Airport, Luapula, Northern and TAZARA. These figures describe the administrative records reviewed and should not be interpreted as a current national estimate without confirmation of the reporting date and coverage.

The qualitative findings indicated that career progression involved both formal and informal dimensions. Participants identified professional visibility, access to influential networks, operational exposure, recognition by senior officers and opportunities to demonstrate command experience as important to advancement. The reported concerns centred on whether women had comparable opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities and whether their achievements received equivalent recognition.

Reported barriers included opaque or unfair promotion and appointment practices, unequal access to operational command and specialist training, limited mentoring and coaching, informal networks and favouritism, gender stereotypes, male-dominated organisational culture, unequal power relations and weak implementation of gender policies. Participants also identified transparent promotion procedures, equitable operational exposure, structured mentoring and sponsorship, leadership development, stronger gender-policy accountability and organisational culture change as measures for improving progression.

VII. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The administrative figures demonstrate that women were present across the senior ranks but were unevenly represented, particularly at Commissioner and Senior Assistant Commissioner levels. Women accounted for 22.0% of the officers in the senior-rank records and 19.1% of the Officers in Charge records. These patterns support the conclusion that women's underrepresentation is not simply an absence from leadership, but a disparity in access to positions associated with strategic authority and command.

The findings are consistent with literature describing career progression as a sequence of opportunities rather than a straightforward movement through rank. Access to operational assignments, specialist training, acting appointments, mentoring and professional networks can influence whether officers acquire the experience and visibility used in promotion decisions. From the perspective of Feminist Organisational Theory, the findings draw attention to the organisational arrangements through which these opportunities are distributed and recognised. The theory helps frame questions about whether apparently neutral procedures operate equitably in practice (Acker, 1990).

The reported concerns about gender stereotypes and assumptions about leadership suitability can be interpreted through Gender Role Theory. Where leadership is associated with behaviours culturally coded as masculine, women may face conflicting expectations or additional scrutiny when demonstrating authority and command. The findings do not establish that all promotion decisions were discriminatory; rather, they show that participants perceived gendered expectations as relevant to career progression. This interpretation is consistent with research on role congruity and prejudice towards women leaders (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Karau, 2002).

The findings further suggest a possible gap between formal gender-equality commitments and everyday institutional practice. Policy adoption is important, but implementation requires clear responsibilities, accessible procedures, monitoring and review of outcomes. The reported barriers also indicate that individual leadership development should be accompanied by institutional measures. Mentoring and coaching may strengthen preparedness, but cannot substitute for transparent promotion, equitable access to assignments and accountability for policy implementation.

Participants perceived that women's limited representation could narrow the range of perspectives available in senior decision-making and affect role modelling, staff confidence and responsiveness to gender-related concerns. These are perceptions reported by participants. The study did not independently measure police performance, public trust or service-delivery outcomes and therefore cannot establish a direct causal relationship between women's representation and leadership effectiveness. Leadership effectiveness also depends on professional competence, authority, resources, accountability and institutional support.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that women's underrepresentation in senior leadership in the Zambia Police Service is both numerical and institutional. Administrative records show uneven representation across senior ranks and command positions, while participants

identify barriers linked to promotion transparency, access to operational assignments and specialised training, mentoring, informal networks, gender stereotypes, organisational culture and policy implementation.

The findings, interpreted through Feminist Organisational Theory and Gender Role Theory, indicate the importance of examining both the institutional distribution of career opportunities and the social expectations that shape perceptions of women's leadership suitability. Addressing the gap requires institutional reform alongside individual leadership development. The ZPS should strengthen transparent and accountable promotion and appointment procedures; ensure equitable access to operational assignments and specialised training; establish structured mentoring, coaching and sponsorship; monitor career progression using gender-disaggregated data; and strengthen accountability for implementing gender policies. Further longitudinal analysis of promotion, retention, assignment and training records would help establish where disparities arise and assess the effectiveness of reforms. The relationship between representation and leadership effectiveness should be examined using appropriate measures rather than assumed.

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