Women in Educational Leadership: Realities and Challenges

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Abstract

Background: The discourse on school leadership is evolving as women increasingly assume leadership roles across various sectors globally. This shift underscores the importance of hiring and empowering women in key educational leadership positions, given the potential advantages of such representation. Despite expanded opportunities, women often navigate these roles in an unplanned, spontaneous manner, highlighting the need to examine their experiences and challenges.

Objective: This study explores how women capitalize on emerging opportunities to lead in educational institutions, focusing on their personal experiences, challenges, and strategies for overcoming barriers. The research aims to provide insights into the unique contributions of female leaders and identify support systems to enhance their impact in school leadership.

Methods: A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 15 female school leaders across various educational levels. The study is framed through a critical feminist perspective, which informs the analysis of gender dynamics in educational leadership. The interviews centered on participants' career trajectories, institutional barriers, and leadership strategies.

Findings: Key themes emerged, including the influence of career choices, societal and institutional barriers, and adaptive leadership strategies employed by women. The study reveals that educational leadership remains a complex and gendered issue, with significant

implications for policy and practice. Female leaders often navigate systemic challenges while leveraging collaborative and transformative leadership approaches.

Conclusion: This study contributes a critical feminist lens to the discourse on women in educational leadership, offering a framework for stakeholders to understand and support female leaders. The findings highlight the need for targeted policies and institutional changes to foster gender equity in leadership roles.

Novelty: The novelty of this work lies in its emphasis on the unplanned nature of women's leadership trajectories and their adaptive strategies, providing actionable insights for advancing women in school leadership.

 Keywords: challenges, educational leadership, opportunities, realities, women leadership

Introduction

The globalized world has rhetorically welcomed and accepted all the voices of equality, access, opportunity, rights, and freedom disregard to religion, race, color, caste, geography, gender, or any other bias to uphold human dignity. It has well reflected even in the extensively debated forum of empowering equal half of human population – women. Obviously, therefore, increasing women's representation in leadership roles across sectors has assumed a priority agenda and task for governments world-over. Talking of education sector, there has been underrepresentation of women for long in leadership role mainly because of traditional attitudes linked to patriarchy and community. Undoubtedly, lack of qualified women and defensive-natured governments have also been other major reasons of delaying and slowing leadership-tasking of Schools to women.

Women face several obstacles on leadership positions due to various preconceptions in society repeatedly echoing them as less competent than men. There is a general scenario that men Principals get things done easily, but the same is not that easy for women Principals as they are reluctantly accepted. This is where frustration generally comes from, as they talk about the interference they usually meet on their ways (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008). Here lies the need of "protecting" women against all stereotypes, socio-cultural biases, and paying close attention to their school leadership by comforting them explore their full potential to achieve the professional targets.

In the backdrop of above facts, empowering and facilitating women to assume leadership and management roles in educational system of Nepal deserved a study and so is this work. As traditional value structures besides existing perceptions and attitudes of people are changing in the contemporary society everywhere, women must assume leading roles not merely as active participants in the changing dimension of academia if they are not to be further discriminated. This has become a priority in education policy programs worldwide. It plays a crucial role in refining School outcomes by influencing the motivations and capabilities of the Teachers, as well as the school climate and environment.

The past three decades has seen many education reforms intended to raise the achievement standards of students. These reforms have resulted in School leadership becoming

of great interest in international education. The leadership's influence in shaping the reforms and improving the quality of education, as well as in the job satisfaction of the Teachers and the successful operation of the school unit is catalytic and at the same time regulatory. Leadership is not a person or a position. It is a complex moral relationship between people based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good. It conjures up an image of a political figure, a pioneer, or an executive formulating a plan to beat the competition for his or her organization. Effective leadership has become critical to public sector administration as driven by several factors, with the top among them being, the demand of performance from leaders in political power, the citizens' demand for quality service, budget cuts and the requirement for modernization (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2006; Coleman & Kugler, 2014). At the same time, Kotter (2007) asserts that the first and most basic prerequisite for leadership is the willingness to lead and the ability to lead. On the other hand, their ability to convince and inspire others enables them in carrying out the vision.

Leadership is about deciding where you need to go as a team to 'win' and it is, exciting, challenging, and competitive. Longman and Madsen (2014) state, "Leaders are not just born. Sure, some people are born with strong skills and strengths for leading in certain situations, but it is noticeably clear that leadership can also be developed. That means everyone can strengthen their skills and abilities to lead and influence." Bans-Akutey (2021) thinks, "It is also observed that every responsibility lies on the leader as it is the leader who is expected to define the goals, clarify the path, remove obstacles and provide support."

The role of School leaders in education is crucial, though discredited in the education hierarchy, for the proper functioning of the schools they run. They are the visionaries, those who capture and inspire a vision for their school's future, and their collaborators and Teachers. At the same time, they handle the proper functioning of the school, the coordinators of the efforts, and the people who solve any problem within the school. The school leader is also financially responsible for the proper management of the school's resources, besides the personal and professional development of Teachers. As a research strategy, two major research questions have been formulated. Creswell (2011: 385) advocates for "strategies for good question construction," as it helps to create "unambiguous language...posing questions that are applicable to all participants." This study helped to see educational leadership as an unplanned emerging phenomenon. In addition, it also eased recommending an ideal model for studying educational leadership as a diverse and emerging discussion in real School settings.

Objectives of the study

This study was undertaken with the objective of finding answers to the following questions, concerning different stakeholders and their perspectives:

1.   What are the realities and challenges faced by women in educational leadership?
2.   How do female Head Teachers deal with their professional challenges?

Review of Related Literature

Msila (2017) stated that the theme of women in leadership is becoming increasingly prominent in many countries. Many women are beginning to overcome the long-standing social

stereotypes that suggest women cannot succeed in leadership positions. Historically, women have questioned their own analytical skills and capabilities in leadership roles; however, perspectives have shifted. Bellinger (2013) noted, "Women lead in different ways. Women rarely feel the need to speak the most at a meeting to make their point."

Despite increased engagement of women in public decision-making roles, gender equality remains distant. According to UN Women (2020), women hold only 21% of ministerial positions globally, and just three countries have achieved 50% or more women in parliament. Only 22 countries are currently headed by a woman. At the current pace, gender parity among Heads of Government is not expected until 2150.

Eagly and Sczesny (2009) observed a significant increase in female leadership across Europe, although women remain clustered in lower levels of management. In most sectors, including business, men still occupy the majority of decision-making positions. Similarly, while women are less likely than men to join small groups, studies indicate that once encouraged, they benefit just as much (Madsen, 2012).

Harvard's former President emphasized that innovation, flexibility, and collaboration—qualities often associated with female leadership—are essential in the modern economy (Madsen, 2012). Michelle Bachelet, the first female President of Chile and founding Executive Director of UN Women, argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified existing inequalities, demanding radical transformations driven by inclusive and feminist leadership (UN Women, 2020).

Globally, education is becoming increasingly feminized, as more women enter the teaching profession. Yet leadership roles remain male-dominated due to long-standing disparities in external exposure and opportunity. Understanding women's personal motivations and the barriers they face is crucial for improving gender balance in educational leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010).

Female leaders worldwide face obstacles such as lack of resources, societal mistrust, and gender-based violence. Despite this, women leaders have demonstrated transformative impact across communities and nations (Nidiffer, 2010; The White House Project, 2009). In Nepal, although the number of female school principals is rising, cultural and gender barriers still hinder leadership effectiveness.

Nepal has ratified key global gender equality frameworks, including CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration, and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. These commitments are embedded in Nepal's Constitution, and efforts continue to align national policies with gender equality standards (UN Women Asia-Pacific, 2020).

The Nepal National Teachers' Association (Sharma, 2019) highlighted that women's empowerment in education is of greater value than in other sectors. Presently, around 42% of school teachers in Nepal are women, and projections suggest this number may exceed 60% within five years.

Globally, women face discrimination, violence, and limited opportunities to lead. Despite comprising over half the population (Copp, 2020), they remain underrepresented in leadership.

Tiessen and Lough (2019) noted that although women-friendly laws exist in Nepal, male dominance still hinders their effective implementation. Leadership training at the grassroots level is essential to build capacity and awareness.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) emphasized that successful women leaders are often collaborative, justice-oriented, and bring instructional and spiritual dimensions into their work. Leadership theories such as the Great Man Theory and Trait Theory argue that leaders are born, not made (Colbert et al., 2012), while Behavioral and Skills theories support that leadership can be learned (Derue et al., 2011; Northouse, 2016).

Northouse (2016) described directive and supportive leadership as two core dimensions of effective leadership. Dunaetz (2018) expanded on leadership styles to include participative and achievement-oriented styles. House's Path-Goal Theory emphasized that effective leadership is contingent on aligning behavior, need, and context (EPM, 2019). Overall, there is no universal leadership model. Instead, the most effective approach varies by situation, requiring a flexible blend of leadership styles.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by women in educational leadership in Nepal. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights based on their experiences. The participants included nineteen currently serving female school head teachers and three retired female head teachers from diverse regions of Nepal, representing various school levels and geographical areas such as Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Kaski, Tanahun, and Chitwan.

Data collection was conducted primarily through focused group discussions. During these sessions, each active head teacher was allotted 10–15 minutes to share their experiences, focusing on the challenges they faced in leadership roles and the strategies they used to navigate them. These discussions aimed to uncover both personal and institutional realities of female leadership in schools.

To deepen the understanding of long-term perspectives and historical challenges, three retired female head teachers were also included in the study. Each of them was given 20 minutes to speak, providing detailed reflections on their leadership journeys and how the landscape of female leadership has evolved over time. These discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis. This methodological approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of female educational leaders in Nepal and helped identify common themes and unique challenges across different contexts.

Results and Discussion

Based on a thorough review of the literature and the findings from the research conducted, several key themes emerged regarding women's leadership in education. These themes include the aspirations of women to lead, shifting attitudes towards female leadership, the challenges faced by women leaders, and their leadership styles. Below, I present my findings along with my analytical reflections.

Women's Aspirations for Leadership

The study affirms that women exhibit leadership aspirations on par with their male counterparts. In both educational and political organizations, female leaders have demonstrated equal competence in fulfilling their responsibilities. Women in leadership positions often cite their educational abilities and creativity as key drivers for their ambition to lead. Leadership, for these women, is not simply about authority but about empowerment, compassion, and making a positive impact on the people they supervise, especially students (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010).

Changing Attitudes Toward Women Leaders

Over recent decades, perceptions of women in leadership roles have significantly transformed. While women's career paths have broadened, this has not necessarily led to a proportional increase in female leadership positions. Despite women constituting over 50% of the workforce in high-paying managerial roles globally, studies indicate that women still face barriers in ascending to leadership positions (UN Women, 2020). However, as demonstrated by women leaders in various institutions, their effectiveness in leadership is undeniable. Attributes such as passion, teamwork, honesty, and transparent communication have allowed female leaders to thrive and prove their capability in roles traditionally dominated by men (Colbert et al., 2012).

Barriers to Female Leadership

Despite the growing presence of women in professional roles, significant barriers persist in their ascension to leadership positions. These obstacles include discrimination, lack of support, and limited access to leadership development opportunities. Cultural and societal beliefs, rooted in gender stereotypes, often reinforce the notion that leadership is inherently a male activity. As a result, women are often discouraged from pursuing leadership roles or are not seen as suitable candidates, even when they have the requisite qualifications and experience (Copp, 2020; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). The presence of female role models is critical in challenging these gendered expectations, as it demonstrates that women can succeed in leadership roles.

Socio-Cultural Barriers to Leadership

Cultural norms continue to pose significant challenges to women in leadership roles, particularly within educational settings. Female leaders in schools often face resistance from staff and community members who hold deeply ingrained beliefs about women's inability to lead effectively. These socio-cultural barriers, shaped by patriarchal values, create an environment where women are not trusted to lead, even if they have proven their competence (Mollel & Tshabanbu, 2014). Participants in this study consistently highlighted how these cultural attitudes hinder their effectiveness, indicating the importance of addressing societal norms to support female leadership.

Women as Effective Problem-Solvers

Female leaders are often seen as effective problem-solvers, a trait linked to their ability to empathize, listen, and engage in detailed analysis. According to social role theory, women

are perceived to embody communal traits such as empathy, kindness, and concern for others (Alqahtani, 2019). These qualities allow women leaders to navigate workplace issues, mediate conflicts, and anticipate challenges in interpersonal relations. As a result, female leaders are not only able to resolve conflicts but also proactively prevent tensions from escalating, fostering a more collaborative and positive environment.

Collaboration as a Leadership Style

Collaboration emerged as a significant aspect of female leadership in this study. Female leaders tend to adopt a collaborative style that emphasizes teamwork, shared decision-making, and active communication. This aligns with research indicating that transformational leadership styles, which focus on collaboration and engagement, contribute to higher levels of organizational effectiveness (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). By prioritizing empathy, consensus-building, and listening, women leaders create environments that promote collective success and inclusivity.

Policy Implications and Structural Interventions

Finally, the study suggests that while gender quotas have been employed in some South Asian countries to improve female representation in leadership roles, more needs to be done to address systemic inequalities. Quotas can serve as a useful tool to increase the representation of women in leadership positions; however, they must be complemented by structural changes within institutions to ensure that women are not only present but also supported and empowered to succeed (Tiessen & Lough, 2019). The following actionable recommendations are proposed:

- **Gender-Sensitive Training:** Leadership programs should actively address the unique challenges women face, such as gender bias and work-life balance. These programs must focus on skill-building, mentorship, and career progression to ensure women are equipped for senior leadership roles. Initiatives like *Lean In Circles*, created by Sheryl Sandberg, have proven successful in offering women peer support and leadership training to overcome workplace barriers. These circles provide a platform for women to share experiences, develop confidence, and gain the necessary tools to rise to leadership positions. It is crucial for organizations to recognize the value women bring to leadership and implement such initiatives to unlock their potential.

- **Cultural Change Initiatives:** It is imperative to challenge and reshape the deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that limit women's leadership opportunities. Campaigns like *LikeAGirl* by Always have shown how powerful cultural change can be, promoting the idea that doing things "like a girl" is a symbol of strength and capability. Such initiatives educate society on the importance of gender equality in leadership roles and break down harmful stereotypes. It is time to take bold action and recognize the transformative impact of female leadership on organizational success, making these cultural shifts a priority for all sectors.

- **Supportive Work Environments:** Creating a supportive work environment that promotes work-life balance is key to empowering women in leadership roles. Companies like *Google* and *Salesforce* are leading the way by implementing flexible

hours, on-site childcare, and generous parental leave policies. These efforts have proven to help employees—especially women—balance their personal and professional lives more effectively. Organizations must acknowledge that when women are given the proper support, they not only thrive but also bring diverse, innovative leadership to the table. It is time for every organization to adopt these policies and recognize the positive impact of supportive work environments on women's leadership success.

- **Leadership Development Programs:** Mentorship and leadership programs tailored specifically for women are essential for overcoming the unique challenges they face in leadership roles. Programs like the *UNDP Women's Leadership Initiative*, run by the United Nations Development Programme, provide women with critical leadership training, mentorship, and networking opportunities. These initiatives equip women with the confidence and skills needed to break through barriers and advance to senior leadership positions. It is vital for organizations to create and invest in such programs, ensuring that women not only have the opportunity to lead but are fully prepared to excel.

By implementing these recommendations, organizations must urgently recognize the immense value women bring to leadership. These strategies will create more inclusive leadership environments and enable women to thrive in roles where they can drive innovation, change, and long-term success.

Conclusion

Being a school principal is both a challenging and rewarding experience. It is not just about managing resources or controlling the environment; it is about being acutely aware of the potential challenges and being prepared to overcome them. Female school leaders, in particular, demonstrate immense courage, determination, and resilience in handling these challenges. Despite significant strides in education and employment for women, the "glass ceiling" remains a reality, especially in leadership roles (Reinhold, 2005). Many women continue to balance teaching, leading the school, and managing household responsibilities, often under greater stress compared to their male counterparts.

The findings from this study highlight that women leader often adopt a collaborative and relationship-driven approach to leadership. They prioritize educational quality and the development of a positive institutional image, in contrast to their male counterparts who may focus more on financial management and system reinforcement. However, female leaders frequently face the challenge of "stereotype threat," where their influence and participation are sometimes undermined due to prevailing societal expectations of leadership as a predominantly male domain.

To overcome these barriers and enable more women to pursue and succeed in leadership roles, it is crucial to provide them with the necessary resources, training, and support. Access to higher education, mentorship, and leadership development programs can help women enhance their skills and confidence. Additionally, financial empowerment, through improved compensation and resource access, will enable women to remain in leadership positions

without being held back by economic limitations. Gender quotas may also play a role in increasing women's representation in leadership, ensuring a more balanced and equitable decision-making process.

Further research is needed to explore the barriers women face in educational leadership and the strategies they use to navigate these obstacles. Understanding women's perspectives on the challenges they encounter and the benefits of holding leadership positions will help create an inclusive, gender-equal environment in educational settings. It is only through such focused efforts that we can empower women leaders to continue making a lasting impact on the education sector and society as a whole.

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