

## **Women's Experiences as Educational Leaders: Evidence from Islamabad Model Schools**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the experiences of women in educational administrative positions in public Schools in Islamabad, Pakistan by using a qualitative research design. In-depth interviews were conducted with head teachers from twenty girls' model schools from urban areas of Islamabad. The findings of this study reveal that school leadership is not as simplistic and easy as assumed. Instead, it is complex and challenging due to personal and organizational constraints. The data shows that the participants felt reluctant to take leading positions as a result of work-family conflict. Furthermore, they also feared to be able to balance household responsibilities and administrative tasks. While some felt reluctant to work as leaders due to their attributes, others who opted to take the leading positions made personal sacrifices. Moreover, several organizational rules and regulations such as maternity leave and policies regarding child care were believed to distract teachers thus providing hurdles in their careers. It can be concluded that women navigate through these personal and organizational constraints to prove themselves as effective leaders. The findings from this study may offer useful insights to early-career women who aspire to work as potential leaders. These also have implications for policymakers concerned with school education in the country.

**Keywords:** *School Principals, Leadership, Barriers, Family Conflict, Pakistan*

### **1. Introduction**

Leadership is a complex phenomenon; it needs various leadership capabilities, whether presumed by men or women (Freedman, 2012; Knights & Richards, 2003; Nazemi et al., 2012). Despite promises to gender equality by the international community, the number of women in leadership positions especially in educational institutions remains scarce (Blackmore, 2013; Rue & Byars, 2005). The dearth of women in leadership positions is a global phenomenon. In the US for example, women gained access to administrative positions in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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century and their employment was generally in women's colleges (Thelin, 2004). Similar examples exist in Europe, Africa, and Asia where women continue to experience hurdles in attaining leadership positions (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012). Working women in Pakistan experience similar hurdles ranging from social restrictions, conventional lobbies, limited educational opportunities and lack of motivation to aspire to leadership roles. Moreover, several religious and cultural factors including modesty, mobility, issues, *purdah* (veil) restrict women's lives in many ways (Rehman et al., 2019; Harris, 2008; Saadi et al., 2009). Hence, the participation of women in leadership positions remains low, especially in male-dominated professions.

However, in the gender-segregated public school system in Pakistan, the scenario of leadership is seen through a different lens. Men and women are promoted to the positions of school heads based on seniority and requirements such as professional degrees (M.Ed.), academic qualifications (MA in any subject), and their contributions as teacher leaders among others (Hurley, 2016). Teacher leadership entails a complete set of attributes that trains and prepares teachers for their potential roles as school leaders (Cheung, et al., 2018). Hence men and women teachers do not compete for leadership positions and so the competition is between the men and women (Rehman et al., 2019). However, this does not make the career trajectories of the school heads any easier, since they have to encounter several personal, social, and cultural challenges. This is especially true for women who aspire to work as school leaders (Purinton et al., 2018).

In Pakistan, the need for improved school leadership has been highlighted and endorsed in various national educational policies. For instance, the National Education Policy (1998-2010) focused on good governance at the school level by offering intensive training for senior managers, head teachers, and principals. It has been described by policymakers in National Education Policy (2009) that improved leadership at educational institutions demands expertise and professional standards from both policymakers and school leaders but they are not well trained and prepared. It is widely acknowledged that necessary initiatives are needed for the training of school leaders and policymakers by following the patterns of developed countries. To this end, the National Education Policy (2017) expects that all leaders, including principals, vice-principals, and subject teachers perform their respective functions effectively. It has also been argued that leaders at the school level must possess high ideals and sound moral characters. Overview of national educational policies reflect that despite all these endeavors for improved school leadership,

the component of empowering women in leadership positions is missing in educational policies.

Scholarly work on school leadership as a gendered phenomenon in the western context is well established (Botha, 2013; Maranto, 2018). However, the scholarship specifically on women school leaders in the context of Pakistan is scarce (Bierema, 2016). This is an important area of inquiry since women's leadership is a necessity (Adams et al., 2017; Reeves, 2011). Studying women's trajectories and their struggles for attaining leadership and sustaining on such positions is important especially from a women's perspective since the majority of the work on leadership has been carried out by men analyzing women's performance (Kruse & Prettyman, 2008). This male lens to present women's struggles is problematic since it ignores the nuances, the pains that can be well captured by women researchers. Hence, there is a need to examine the notion of leadership from the standpoint of women (Smith, 1990). The contextual realities of women's lives will help us in understanding their challenges in a more intricate way. Taking this as a point of departure this paper aims to examine the experiences of school heads working in model schools in Islamabad city. The findings from this study may offer useful insight to those women are in the early stages of their careers in schools and are likely to play leadership roles later in their career. These may also contribute to the existing body of knowledge on women's leadership especially in reference to schools.

### **1.1 Objective of the Study**

1. To examine the personal and organizational challenges for women's participation in educational administrative positions in public schools in Islamabad.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

1. How women schools heads experience leadership?
2. Why are women reluctant to take up leadership positions in schools?
3. Does family work conflict hamper women's participation as leaders?
4. Do personality traits influence women's decision to take up leadership positions?
5. How do organizational policies affect women's leadership positions?

## **2. Literature Review**

The idea of leadership has been redefined in the current globalized world. Previously it was considered as one person authority but now it is considered as collective effort (Rehman et al., 2019). The idea of team building, empowerment, and relationship are expected as vital for progress in this transformed educational leadership. To meet the demands of the changing needs of leadership in the modern world women encounter several challenges. For

instance, women in managerial positions are expected to behave like men. Those who exhibit feminine traits are seen as unsuccessful, inadequate, and less capable (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Consequently, women who want to attain managerial roles often face a double-edged sword in the attainment of goals. This discourages women to come up to serve in leadership positions resulting in low participation.

Besides, the lack of motivation for women to aspire to leadership positions, there are several other reasons for the low participation of women in leadership positions. Socialization has been blamed for not inculcating interpersonal skills abilities and personal and professional values among young women (Earley & Weindling, 2004). Self-efficacy and confidence are the traits that are believed to be lacking in educational leaders (Grodzki, 2011).

Furthermore, it has been found that due to lack of spousal support and childbearing responsibilities the majority of the woman teachers do not enter the fields of administration and leadership. In some cases, women cannot become head teachers due to a lack of support from male peers and seniors as they are not facilitated by providing opportunities for developing required skills and appropriate experience that is prerequisite for promotion. Hence, despite efforts to impart adequate training to potential women leaders empowering them to learn about theoretical exposure and professional development and thus preparing them for the leadership positions (Scot, 2015; Hilliard & Jackson, 2011), yet women still show reluctance to work in such positions.

Additionally, the effectiveness of women as administrators is a hurdle in the way of their success as leaders. Among women who do achieve positions of power, it has been argued that normally single women perform better in leadership positions. In a study conducted in 2017, it was found that few of the women who held the positions of college or university presidents were married as compared to males who held the same positions. In 2006, results of a survey conducted in America reported that as compared to 89% of married male college presidents only 63% of women were married. It was explored that as compared to males, women college presidents were more divorced and the main cause of divorce was college presidency (Smith, 1990). The same is the case with chief academic officers that Likewise, 90% of male chief academic officers were married as compared to 70% of married woman chief academic officers (Scot, 2015). These figures show that leadership poses serious challenges for married women largely due to the work-family conflict it entails.

When it comes to the discussion of effectiveness style is another dimension, which is debated in reference to leadership. Gender and leadership literature from the west has shown that women compete equally well with their

male counterparts. Women are found to be democratic leaders as opposed to autocratic ones compared with men. However, women fail to claim authority assertively which deprives them of opportunities. This inability to claim authority is largely because of gender bias, lack of motivation to work as leaders, insufficient experience, and above all family responsibilities which overweigh their professional careers (Bowl & McGinn, 2004).

Further, women's access to leadership positions in educational institutions is hampered due to cultural and social restrictions. Women are expected to act according to the cultural expected notion of womanhood by exhibiting certain feminine characteristics in terms of behavior, child-raising, housekeeping (Celikten, 2005). Under such circumstances performing the role of a leader in a society where men hold power in every walk of life becomes a dilemma for women (Kirk, 2004).

Moreover, several organizational factors limit women from participating in leadership roles due to which women feel unprepared and overwhelmed while performing their leadership roles (Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Oyeniran, 2018). Alexander (2018) conducted a study to understand the experiences of the women principals who lead in secondary education in a southeastern state of the United States. This study found that women leaders are expected to be nurturing and strong. It was also found that women lack the support of male colleagues. Likewise, Husain et al. (2018) found that male teachers are more likely to oppose women principals and request transfer to schools having male principals. Such opposition could inhibit the leadership career of women principals. Studies have recommended appropriate supports such as coaching and mentoring to help women educational leaders deal with the increased stress, emotional isolation, and potential burnout that can accompany the job (Grodzki, 2011; Lattuca, 2012; Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013; Simkins, Close, & Smith, 2009).

Hence, the above discussion illustrates that leadership remains a challenge for women in all kinds of educational settings. This paper aims to address the experiences of women leaders in schools where the glass ceiling may not be an issue as such, yet women continue to face problems.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This paper takes a constructivist approach and uses a qualitative research design with In-depth Interviews (IDIs) as a method of data collection. This design was adopted as it produces a detailed description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences; and interprets the meanings of their actions (Denzin, 2002).

### **3.2 Population & Sample**

The universe consisted of a total of 20 girls model schools in the urban area of Islamabad and out of this a population of 10 schools was selected by using a convenient sampling technique. The heads from these schools were interviewed to share their experiences and opinions of women in educational leadership.

### **3.3 Instrumentation**

Keeping in view the study objectives and research gap identified through a reading of literature, a semi-structured open-ended interview guide was prepared (Patton, 2002) and face-to-face interviews were conducted by the researcher. Each interview session lasted for about 50 minutes and the longest was 75 minutes. The first part carried background information of the respondents. The second part of the guide consisted of questions on characteristics of women's leadership, the ambitions of women to grasp educational leadership positions, the status of women participation in an educational leadership position, others' perceptions towards women leadership, and barriers of woman educational leadership.

The validity of the interview guide was checked through face validity and pilot testing was done to improve the guide. Interviews were directed by a conversation with respondents, by assembling their stories and knowledge about their skills as well as views.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants. They were assured that the confidentiality of their information would be maintained. During analysis, the data collected were transcribed, coded and themes were developed (Clark & Braun, 2013). During this stage, attention was given to the issue of the validity of data and its presentation. During descriptive validity accountability of researchers was closely taken into account as to how they presented the views of participants. Interpretive validity was checked constantly by going back to the interview texts to ensure that what was provided by researchers is actually what was conveyed by the participants. Finally, in terms of validity for generalizability, it is acknowledged that we cannot generalize the experiences of these women to all school heads in Islamabad. However, the experiences of these women do deepen our understanding of how school leadership is experienced in public schools in Islamabad.

Finally, all ethical measures were undertaken during the data collection and analysis stage, and the confidentiality of the participants has been maintained in every possible way. In this vein, the names of schools and the names of principals have not been disclosed here.

#### **4. Data Analysis & Interpretation**

This study was open to examining the constraints as well as opportunities experienced by women school heads in the selected schools. Yet, the data guided to focus more on the constraints as this is what the participants were more concerned about. They shared in-depth about the nature of constraints and how these influenced their lives as women. In what follows we discuss the personal and organizational barriers encountered by the school heads.

##### **4.1. Personal Barriers**

As discussed in the literature review, the low participation of women in leadership positions in educational institutions has been related to many factors. In this study, several personal factors were discussed by the participants in reference to their leadership positions. The majority acknowledged their reluctance in working in such positions due to work-family conflict. Women prioritize their families overwork and since leadership demands time women are not willing to sacrifice their families. Hence, women are not enthusiastic to take such positions. In this respect, they shared their personal experiences where they had attempted to delay to work as school heads, due to issues like pregnancy, young children, aged parents, etc. For instance, one informant explained her views as follows;

I was 8½ months pregnant when they gave me the position. I had brought the problem of pregnancy to their attention as well as said that I would not be in a position to accept the presented position. Furthermore, I was incapable because I was on a full year [maternity] leave. Fairly, I have to respect the director that appointed me because he said to me... “You’re never going to have this chance again.” (P7 Sajida)

This participant decided to take up the position despite her pregnancy and instead of taking a year break she joined back after 90 days. However, she explained the challenges she had to deal with after taking this decision.

Likewise, some women spoke about their unwillingness to acquire the position due to their personality traits. They just believed that they were not meant to be leaders to get work done from others so they preferred not to take the challenge with the fear of failure if they are not able to manage things well. Some women have such features that are shown to barriers to their administrative positions, such as nervousness, idleness, carelessness of duty, shortsightedness, lack of self-confidence, lack of bravery, offensive dressing, inferiority complex, and poor self-image, which were revealed by the respondents.

Lack of confidence is one reason for women to feel reluctant in taking leadership positions even when they are available. One of the principals (P9) stated about assuming her existing managerial position of the headmistress, “in



my case such as I used to ask myself that how am I being a woman can be a school head? I felt it was the males' role. Thus for a very long time, I was an associate head although I capable to be the chief head. I primarily did not plan to become a head but later I gave it a second thought" (P9). An issue highlighted by some informants was how a woman leader should represent herself in the male chauvinist society. One participant explained this as follows;

The school appointed me because of my strong organizational abilities as well as a functional approach to management. I used to work for the government; therefore I know the male power structures and hope. That is why I select a managerial and organizational tactic rather than a personal method. I am good at hiding as well as governing my feelings to be a professional principal in this school. (P.6)

The participants were of the view that though they had not received any formal training after taking over their positions but experience and experiments made them confident about their work as explained below:

I have been in this position for several years; I am skilled in resolving teacher fights, particularly curriculum connected problems. It is not a big agreement for me. Except for teacher fights, there are other problems as well as resolutions for me to meeting and arrangement with. Time administration is vigorous for me. I have to give a fast resolution in some circumstances. I know obviously what my job significances are. (P4)

In addition, women who worked as school heads were not satisfied with the benefits they were offered as one participant stated: "We continuously have to sacrifice a lot but we don't even get any important inducements".

Though leadership was a challenge for all women they also showed a sense of accomplishment as indicated below;

I think I feel a great sense of achievement. I never gave up my goals or felt I sacrificed everything, I ever desired to accomplish. Sure it's busy as well as yes, there are very traumatic days, but I don't think that it is reasonable to expect there not to be. I functioned very hard for this position and I feel that by the accomplishment of my goals, I have a sense of contentment in that. Being a mother and positive career woman has only strengthened that contentment. (P 10)

The data reflects that knowledgeable, expert, and energetic woman principals liked their positions due to their understanding, obligation as well as abilities of school management. The less interested as well as individually indiscreet principals presented lame explanations of domestic problems, child education and caring accountabilities, mistreatment by the officers/officials in the offices.



#### **4.2. Organizational Barriers**

Several concerns were shared regarding organizational policies and how they affect women's chances to attain leadership positions. Four participants (P1, P3, P7, and P8) were concerned that many of the organizational rules and regulations delay women from either succeeding or pursuing leadership positions. They understood that the rules and regulations do not favor teachers who are mothers. Therefore such people are not capable to obtain their promotions on time as their male colleagues do and hence they remain behind in their career trajectories. Some of the rules which were problematic for teachers include the structure of the school timetable, strict administration as well as standards of up-gradation and selection of school leaders.

Six of the participants (P1, P3, P5, P7, and P8 & P10) indicated that they were not happy with the duration of maternity leave. Respondents revealed that 90 days were insufficient to recover from the experience of giving birth. Also, in the absence of daycares at schools, the feeling of leaving a 3 months old infant at home is often traumatic for mothers. This especially makes it difficult for women in leadership positions as they end up spending more time at work due to administrative work. To deal with this, most of them reported having terminated their selection as Principals temporarily and choose to come back at a suitable time. Hence these teachers were suffering from disturbed and diminutive career development. Two of the participants (P5 & P10) revealed their experiences before they became Principals when they had frequently kept their children under the trees near the school compound with servants.

Most of the participants reflected that women have to pass through a similar competitive way for up-gradation as well as selection into leadership positions compared to male colleagues. The up-gradation is based on academic qualification, length of service, teaching experience, internal as well as external supervisions, and a face-to-face board interview. The respondents (P2 & P3) revealed that the women continuously come short of the criteria due to various responsibilities loaded on them by the school as well as taking care of household responsibilities which men are exempted from thus giving them an edge.

All the principals were of the view that the high authorities need to be more approachable to woman principals. They complained about aggressive approaches by the authorities towards them as a very disincentive. One of the principals (P2) believed that women should rather be given better treatment in terms of reception as well as provision. She also indicated that the authorities should also consider the professional growth of the principals through regular in-service training, she stated. Importantly, they demanded to be treated well by the higher authorities in management. Some of the respondents (P1, P6, P7, P8, and

P10) proposed that the authorities should make it a point to recruit more women into managerial positions or set out a quota for women.

One reason for the lack of support from organizations is the societal perception of women's work. The culture usually demoralizes women and thus people do not identify women as capable of leading. A principal (P4) argued that society has an opposite opinion on a woman captivating a leadership position. She indicated that "a woman who does anything, the society respects as a males' role is commonly considered, and these contain leadership roles. Two other principals (P5 and P9) gave the same explanations that most people trust that women are more powerful to lead than men. One principal (P9) stated, "Women are perceived to be second to men. When we want people to be leaders, we pursue to select men. That has been the standard, and that has contributed seriously to the underrepresentation of women in leadership and it has affected our educational system."

### **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study illustrated the personal and organizational barriers faced by school principals. The data shows that women working in schools face multiple problems that do not allow them to aspire to be leaders. The main issue was the work-life conflict. Women struggled to fulfill their familial roles and their duties as teachers and they felt taking leadership responsibility could be an additional burden which they resisted. Likewise, according to the data, some of the personal characteristics of women act as barriers to their development in the educational administration. These results are aligned with the findings of Grodzki (2011), who stated that self-efficacy and confidence are the traits that must be developed in educational leaders. In the socialization process, educational leaders need to be valued, recognized, and supported.

The participants shared various organizational barriers that hindered their personal growth and delayed their career prospects thus ultimately affecting their right to compete for the top management positions. These findings are also in line with findings presented by Scot (2015) who stated that socio-cultural heritage and organizational barriers are some of the factors that affect their leadership potential. The findings of the study are also supported by Alexander (2018) who described that women leaders are required to fulfill higher expectations as they are expected to be nurturing and ensure avoidance of appearing too emotional and modern. They are expected to be dressed up properly and showing a positive attitude regarding their assigned duties.

All the principals also clarified their competence to direct various tasks, which go a long way to support them in developing managerial knowledge. This

finding is relatively connected to the knowledge that women's self-management capacity suggestions, its origin to their socialization in childhood, as well as these administration skills are movable to the school administration setting (Alpern, 2016).

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper highlighted the barriers encountered by women school principals in experiencing leadership positions. The participants traced their journey as school leaders and recalled the challenges they had experienced as young teachers during their transition to the top management positions. The study found that the women's experiences of leadership were entangled with their unique positions (i.e. family support, an attitude of colleagues, marital status, young children etc.). Clearly, they seemed to be perplexed due to their dual roles as school administrators and homemakers. Some of them acknowledged their reluctance to work as school heads prioritizing home over career. Personality traits seemed to play a key role in women's willingness to act as leaders. Those who were confident and assertive were more likely to succeed while those who were shy struggled to make an impression. The school management was criticized for their lack of support for women school heads. It was reported that women's unique positions and their needs were not considered while making policies. Some of the rules which were problematic for participants include the structure of the school timetable, strict administration as well as standards of up-gradation, selection of school leaders, and absence of daycares.

## **7. Recommendations**

In light of the findings, this paper recommends that several attempts can be made to facilitate women school heads in performing their roles. The position of school principal should not be imposed based on seniority; instead, it may be voluntary and passionate people willing to serve as leaders should be provided the opportunity so that positive changes can be witnessed in the education system. In this way those who have family issues and they cannot give extra time for the managerial duties may be exempted from this responsibility or they could delay the duty. Secondly, at present leadership seems to be an experiment for the school heads who learn as they work. To overcome this, those who aspire to work should be provided leadership training to allow them to fulfill their responsibilities more diligently.

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