

Challenges Facing Women in School Leadership Positions: At Community Schools in Lalitpur Nepal

Durga Devi Ghimire ^a

^a Mahendra Ratna Campus, Tahachal, Tribhuvan University

Email: ghimiredurga372@gmail.com

<p><i>Article Info:</i> Received: August 14, 2023 Revised: September 13, 2023 Accepted: September 28, 2023</p> <hr/> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Leadership position, community school, challenge, efficiency, cultural and economic factor</p>	<p>ABSTRACT: Women's leadership in education, particularly in the role of women head teachers, plays a pivotal role in advocating for women's rights and fostering inclusive development. However, women in school leadership positions encounter substantial obstacles stemming from cultural, economic, and social factors. This study's primary objective is to delve into the perceptions and experiences of women headteachers concerning the multifaceted challenges they confront while leading community schools in the Lalitpur district of Nepal. To accomplish this, in-depth interviews will be conducted with three women head teachers representing different community schools. Despite the evolving landscape, Nepal still grapples with the prevailing perception of women as second-class citizens. Furthermore, state laws have not entirely rectified these societal disparities, particularly within educational leadership roles. In many instances, women in school leadership positions do not receive the encouragement they deserve, and they often face bias, where they are seen as inferior to their male counterparts. The complex challenges and disparities faced by women in educational leadership underscore the need for further research to comprehensively understand the issue, given the potential diversity of perspectives within Nepalese society.</p>
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Background

The ability to effectively implement leadership skills is a fundamental requirement for successful educational leadership. Numerous studies have indicated that women often outperform men in terms of professional and leadership efficiency. However, women in school leadership positions encounter various cultural, economic, and social barriers. Despite these challenges, there remains a significant disparity in representation between men and women in administrative and leadership roles, particularly in Arab countries (Al-Shihabi & Mohammad, 2001). For instance, Yang (1998) reported that in the United Kingdom, women occupy leadership positions at a rate of no more than 6%, while in the United States, the figure is no

more than 3%. Hynowitz and Schellhardt (1986) also identified the existence of "Glass Ceilings" hindering women's advancement to higher leadership positions.

The slogan "Women and the Renaissance of the Nation," coined during the first conference held in Kuwait in 2010, underscores the crucial role women play in leading various community institutions to success. This is achieved despite the pressures and obstacles they encounter in maintaining institutional work and assuming leadership roles. Furthermore, UNIFEM and UNICEF (2002) have actively worked to eliminate discrimination and prejudice against women, particularly in administrative leadership within community institutions, particularly in the field of education. Their efforts aim to safeguard women's rights and promote inclusive development. Researchers and writers have consistently focused on women, their education, and their roles in community institutions as key leadership issues.

Hill and Ragland (1995) conducted research on overcoming traditional barriers that hinder women from attaining significant leadership positions. Zenville (2001) examined women's experiences, characteristics, and work environments, shedding light on the challenges they face in leadership roles. Sernak (2003) highlighted the cultural traits that characterize women's leadership in schools. According to Lynch (2003), men and women exhibit distinct leadership styles. Men are often described as self-sufficient, decisive, powerful, self-assured, dominant, confident, motivated, competitive, and disciplined—all of which are qualities associated with effective leadership. In contrast, women tend to emphasize interpersonal interaction, cooperation with others, and the importance of social connections over hierarchical structures. This collaborative leadership style is prevalent among women. Dorn and Rouke (1996) identified leadership characteristics specific to women, including patience, positive thinking, enthusiasm, active listening, organizational skills, inclusivity, and the ability to influence those around them.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNFEM) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2002) are committed to eliminating prejudice and discrimination against women, especially concerning leadership positions, preserving women's rights, and advancing inclusive development. UNFEM and UNICEF's efforts have significantly expanded women's roles in school leadership. Furthermore, Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 marked a significant shift towards gender equality. Notable conventions include the 1965 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the 1975 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009). These conventions aimed to eradicate negative social, political, cultural, and structural practices that hinder gender equity and equality, while promoting equal opportunities for both men and women (Shava, G. N., Tlou, F. N. & Mpfu, M. 2019). Researchers and practitioners worldwide have devoted attention to the roles and skills of women leaders (Omair, 2008; Stead and Eliot, 2009). Leaders play a crucial role in the education system's survival and the attainment of excellence (Stead & Eliot, 2009; Gronan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Studies have highlighted women's professional and leadership efficiency, which at times surpasses that of men. Nevertheless, there remains a significant disparity in women's occupational and leadership status, leading to unequal representation in administrative and

leadership roles. Despite the myriad pressures and obstacles that women face in maintaining institutional work and assuming leadership roles, they continue to play a pivotal role in leading various community institutions to success. However, it is worth noting that comprehensive research on the challenges faced by women in school leadership positions has been notably lacking. Therefore, the primary focus of this research centers on addressing the Challenges Facing Women in School Leadership Positions.

Research Questions

To gain a deeper understanding of this issue from the perspective of women headteachers, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do women in school leadership positions confront major challenges?
- To what extent do cultural, economic, and social factors influence women in positions of educational leadership?

The Theoretical Framework

It is widely acknowledged that women tend to adopt communal, relational, and nurturing roles in society, in contrast to men's social roles. Social role theory posits that individual development delineates and prescribes gender roles based on the division of labor by gender. Traditionally, men have been associated with the role of breadwinners, while women have been linked to homemaking (Eagly, 2005). However, feminist analysis challenges this perspective, asserting that women's oppression is rooted in their social, structural, and cultural positioning. Feminist and socio-cultural theories were employed to conceptualize women's epistemological perspectives and the challenges they face in school leadership positions (Bernal, 2002; Collin, 2003). Dominant discourses in structure, culture, and processes dialectically marginalize women leaders (Bernal, 2002). The theoretical framework of this study is depicted in the figure below.

Social and Socio-Political Aspects Hindering Women in Leadership

Despite significant advancements and promotions to leadership positions, women's experiences differ from those of their male counterparts, as revealed in a literature review. Structural, social, and cultural factors hinder their effectiveness as leaders (Almenakash, Abdulaziz, Shaman, Haijan & Dagsh, 2007; Martin, 2011). While overt gender intolerance has diminished globally, subtler forms of institutional discrimination have taken its place. The patriarchal ideology oppressing women is perpetuated by institutional practices, structural arrangements, cultural ideologies, and gender roles. Gender roles marginalize women in less esteemed professions during episodes of intolerance. Structured discrimination, though neutrally intended, adversely affects specific groups (Pincus, 2003). In the realm of leadership, women face multiple hurdles, including the negative institutional environment perpetuating gender bias. Additionally, patriarchal leadership styles present challenges to women's ascent in leadership roles. Female administrators, such as head teachers, must contend with the perception that their femininity may impede their ability to balance responsibilities effectively. Furthermore, women in leadership roles often grapple with the erroneous belief, held by some male school board presidents, that they are incapable of fulfilling their roles effectively (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Cultural Barriers to Women's Leadership

Wilkinson (1996) conducted a study that unveiled common challenges faced by women leaders worldwide, including stereotypes, a lack of role models, and inadequate training opportunities. Research by Stead and Eliots in the Arab Gulf countries highlights the difficulties women encounter in leadership positions, including workplace discrimination, cultural taboos, negative perceptions of working women, and a lack of confidence and trust in female leaders. Cook (2007) identified several factors inhibiting women's progress in leadership roles, such as personnel systems, traditional career paths, male employee attitudes, and women's self-perceptions. Cook (2007) also argued that culture, encompassing community and workplace beliefs, values, practices, and norms, significantly influences the performance of women leaders in positive leadership roles. Indeed, the local community and workplace culture can adversely affect the effectiveness of women leaders and their ability to exercise positive leadership (Cook, 2007). Stanley (2009) underscores the importance of social, cultural, and structural theories in understanding women's oppression and the complexity of achieving gender equality. These theories recognize that women's positions are influenced by a combination of social and cultural factors.

Women in Leadership Hindered by Structural Factors

Social, cultural, and structural theories aim to explain the nature of gender equality and the oppression women face. Within an interlocking system of gender, women leaders in organizations are influenced by social and cultural factors (Stanley, 2009). According to Grosz (2010), cultural, social, and structural theories all examine the same subject of analysis, allowing us to evaluate women in leadership roles from multiple perspectives, including cultural, social, economic, and structural viewpoints. Traditional leadership approaches, as discussed by Parker (2005), have historically emphasized service, adaptability, and transformational leadership. These approaches highlight the significance of power dynamics, policies, and structures in perpetuating gender disparities, while acknowledging broader cultural influences on women's experiences. The 1992 Zimbabwe Affirmative Action Policy aimed to foster gender equity by promoting women's participation in senior leadership roles within government institutions and addressing entrenched gender norms within cultural, social, and structural realms.

Methodology

This study's objective is to identify the challenges encountered by women headteachers in leadership positions within community schools. Employing a phenomenological research design within the qualitative research paradigm, participants were invited to articulate their lived experiences pertaining to the phenomena of their concepts. The research was conducted in the Lalitpur district, with a specific focus on women headteachers in community schools. In-depth interviews were carried out with three women headteachers from three different community schools. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a recognized method for the analysis of qualitative data. Thematic analysis involves examining a collection of textual data, such as interviews, and systematically generating categories and themes from the text. The researcher closely scrutinized the data to identify recurring common themes, topics, ideas, and meanings. The process followed the six steps commonly outlined in the thematic analysis

methodology, as elucidated by Caulfield (2019). These steps include familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, presenting the findings with interpretation.

Result and Discussion

Challenges Facing Female School Heads

Female school heads often experience extended tenures in teaching service and leadership positions while encountering various obstacles that hinder their effective performance. When asked to describe the primary challenges they face, women in school leadership roles identified the following key issues:

Negative Perception within the School Community: Women school heads are frequently viewed negatively by the school community.

Roles and Family Attachments: The responsibilities and attachments within their families can pose challenges to women in school leadership positions.

Inadequate Support from the Community: This includes insufficient backing from both the broader community and fellow educators.

Socio-Cultural Obstacles within the School Setting: Cultural norms and societal expectations can create barriers within the school environment.

Low Self-assurance and Confidence: Female school leaders often lack self-assurance and overall confidence in their roles.

Organizational setup within the School: The structural organization of schools can present challenges for female leaders.

Prejudiced Gender Perceptions: Biased gender perceptions within the educational context can adversely affect women in leadership roles.

Institutional Biases and Discrimination: Institutional practices and discrimination also contribute to the challenges faced by women school heads.

The Impact of Patriarchal Leadership Structures

The perspectives of the three women head teachers interviewed shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by female school heads who are also parents. Balancing their responsibilities as mothers and school heads presents several dilemmas. For some women, the separation from their husbands and families becomes a significant obstacle to taking on school leadership positions. Dorsey (1996) argued that societal norms groom girls from a young age for traditional roles as wives, mothers, and family caregivers. One headteacher, Sanu (name changed), shared her experience:

As a lady head teacher, I'm named Sanu. Our families don't want us to move away. Currently, I'm residing with my children following a separation from my husband and other relatives. I feel lost and isolated, which impacts my work output. When I was single, I could move from one school to another without any issues, but now I cannot leave the school closest to my home and other relatives.

The sentiments expressed by Sanu were echoed by the other two participants, Sarita (name changed) and Hima (name changed), *who emphasized the challenges of balancing school leadership roles with their roles as mothers and family care takers.*

These narratives underscore the complex intersection of gender roles and societal expectations in hindering women's advancement in school leadership positions, shedding light on the need for broader societal changes and support systems to address these challenges effectively.

Challenges Faced by Female School Heads

According to the responses, women's strong familial attachments often dissuade many female educators from pursuing promotions to school head positions, which require them to be away from their families. Female school leaders encounter numerous challenges, with one of the most significant being the struggle to balance their work and family responsibilities. This challenge is particularly pronounced for women who simultaneously hold leadership positions in schools and are mothers. Parental responsibilities can have various impacts on their careers, especially for women with infants and young children, who often bear a disproportionate share of childcare duties. This situation creates a striking paradox where the years during which women build their careers as school leaders coincide with their child-rearing years (Armenti, 2004, as cited in Cooper et al., 2007; Gronan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Martin, 2011; Dominicia, Fried & Zeger, 2009).

As women progress into higher leadership positions, the management of both family life and school leadership roles becomes increasingly complex. The decision-making process for female leaders considering school leadership positions is fraught with challenges, as indicated by the interview responses from all participants.

Factors Influencing Women's Leadership in Schools

According to the participants in this study, culture, encompassing beliefs, roles, values, norms, and practices within schools and communities, significantly affects women's leadership capabilities. Traditionally, schools have assigned leadership roles to men rather than women due to traditional beliefs. Cultural norms and customs in tribal communities perpetuate conservative views of women in leadership positions. Participants in each interview expressed that men tend to dominate women at work due to cultural backgrounds, economic disparities, and social status. These cultural factors manifest as a lack of respect and unequal treatment of women, with society and male colleagues often regarding women as second-class citizens.

Sanu further exemplified this cultural perspective, stating,

Despite women being equally qualified as men, Nepali society does not perceive them the same way. Even though I am the head of this school, society does not respect me like male heads. Teachers and students sometimes do not follow school rules due to my gender. Cultural norms make it challenging for them to accept female leadership.

In another interview, Sarita shared a similar sentiment,

As female educators in leadership roles within schools, we face distinct challenges, especially in communities where leadership is primarily associated with men. We once had a community member visit our school to meet with the head, and upon discovering that she was female, he expressed disbelief that a female teacher could hold such a position. He was directed to the male deputy head by the headteacher, and all his needs were attended to by the deputy. The situation could have been more complicated if the

deputy head was also female, as the man was uncomfortable discussing his concerns with a woman.

These encounters underscore the prevalent belief that leadership positions, whether in organizations or families, are reserved for males, unless no suitable male candidate is available, as noted by Shava and Ndebele (2014). Stereotypical associations of leadership with male roles present a significant challenge for women in management positions, particularly in developing countries (Effendi, 2003). Patriarchal attitudes and structural factors further complicate the situation.

Participants shared common concerns about limited support from colleagues and a lack of trust from both the community and School Development Committees (SDCs). As women leaders, they sometimes feel compelled to assert themselves due to prevailing negative attitudes. SDC leadership positions continue to be predominantly occupied by men, indicating a lack of trust in women leaders.

In conclusion, women's perceived lack of confidence, limited support, and persistent gender stereotypes collectively contribute to the challenges they face in leadership positions, especially in the realm of school leadership.

Structural Challenges and Implications for Women's Leadership

The achievement of institutional goals by school leadership can be hindered by organizational challenges tied to administrative structures, as noted by several researchers (Abu-Khader, 2012; Al-Kubasisi, 2004; Al-Mingash, 2007). An additional structural obstacle is the potential under-empowerment of school heads, limiting their decision-making capacity and their ability to drive the necessary changes for success in their leadership roles (Abu-Khader, 2012). While access to leadership positions has provided women with opportunities to challenge traditional institutional practices, policies, and structures, persistent institutional barriers continue to impede their progress (Stromquist, 2006).

These structural challenges encompass physical and technical difficulties within the work environment that constrain the educational goals of women leaders. The study's findings emphasize that female school heads face numerous challenges in their positions, and some of these challenges stem from interactions with their teachers. Analyzing these issues, various theories, including social, economic, cultural, and structural perspectives, aim to comprehend the complex nature of gender inequality. Women find themselves situated within an interconnected framework of social, economic, and cultural factors, as highlighted by Stanley (2009).

Findings

This study primarily presents the direct perspectives of the three female participants, each offering distinct insights into female leadership within society, considering various social, political, cultural, economic, and structural dimensions. Leading in such a multifaceted society presents inherent challenges. A woman often juggles two primary roles: her family and children, alongside her responsibilities outside the home. Balancing leadership in her career while also being the primary decision-maker at home is a demanding task that requires daily efficiency and dedication.

The predominance of men in leadership roles within a profession predominantly composed of women can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including structural, social, economic, and cultural barriers. This study's findings align with the conclusions drawn by Chabaya, Rembe, and Wadesango (2009), reinforcing the previously identified challenges.

In Nepal, a predominantly Hindu and male-dominated country, female decision-making authority is limited. Society's perception of women differs significantly from Western countries. In this context, women are often confined to domestic roles, primarily centered around kitchen duties and childcare, with men receiving priority within the family. Despite global initiatives, including feminist ideologies and affirmative action, promoting gender equality, masculine leadership continues to prevail in school organizations, as evidenced by this study (Shava and Ndebele, 2014).

Societal norms and cultural expectations traditionally restrict women to specific roles, primarily focused on childcare and domestic responsibilities. The female heads examined in this study deviate from these norms by actively participating in leadership roles, challenging established conventions.

In Nepal, female educators face distinctive challenges within the teaching profession compared to their male counterparts. Instances of addressing them by their husband's name, teasing, and a lack of seriousness from colleagues are prevalent in the community. Additionally, the workplace often lacks the respect and recognition that female educators deserve. These issues are daily realities in the lives of women in Nepal.

These findings underscore the multifaceted challenges that women in leadership positions encounter, emphasizing the need for further exploration and targeted interventions to address gender-related disparities within the profession.

Conclusion

In this study, I have delved into the complex dynamics of female leadership within the context of Nepal, a predominantly Hindu and male-dominated society. Our findings shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by women who take on leadership roles, particularly in the field of education. These challenges encompass a range of factors, including societal norms, cultural expectations, structural barriers, and economic disparities.

One of the most prominent challenges is the dual role that women often assume, simultaneously managing their careers and serving as the primary decision-makers within their households. This dual responsibility places a substantial burden on female leaders, requiring them to balance their professional and personal lives with utmost efficiency and dedication.

Despite global initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, masculine leadership continues to dominate school organizations in Nepal. This phenomenon reflects deeply ingrained societal norms and cultural beliefs that perpetuate traditional gender roles, relegating women primarily to domestic responsibilities.

My study also highlights the prevalence of gender-related biases within the teaching profession, such as addressing female educators by their husband's names, teasing, and a lack of seriousness from colleagues. These biases not only hinder the professional growth of women but also undermine the principles of equality and respect.

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