

AN EXPLORATION OF LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN BILASPUR DISTRICT OF CHHATTISGARH STATE

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Abstract—Women are under-represented in school leadership positions and most of the time they are under-estimated or misrecognize as a school leader. As a teacher, they are accepted but when coming to school leadership positions they are leverage for the selection. The under-representation of women in educational management and leadership is not only experienced in India, but many other countries in the world too. Thus, the present study was tried to identify and explore the leadership barriers faced by women secondary school principals in Bilaspur District of Chhattisgarh state. A semi structured-interview schedule, which was prepared by the researcher and it, was ten women secondary school principals of the Bilaspur District of Chhattisgarh State. The respondents were selected through convenient sampling method. Qualitative data analysis methods were employed in order to turn up at the results. The finding of this exploratory study suggests that, even though the number of women in leadership roles is growing, leadership is still identified with men. All woman principals who were participated in the study posit that the balance between work and family life was an important task for them. Some of them also posit that they continue to face caste-discrimination, exclusion from the male staff members' specially senior teachers, lack of support from their staff members, negative attitude towards women, few role models for them, and lack of professional network, scarcity of training opportunities and support services. However, all of these women principals took advantage of every opportunity to prove their capabilities as leaders who deserve to serve effectively besides men principals.

Introduction:

“Teaching is a good job for a woman but a career with prospects for men”.

—H. Burgess (1989, p. 90)

In the world of education, where women tend to numerically predominate, it is easy to assume that their representations in educational leadership need to be more on above. However, findings from research related to women in educational leadership shows that this is far from the case, and the identification of leadership with men and a male stereotype of

leadership in education, as elsewhere, is still the underlying norm [12]. Many studies ([1] [2][5] [12] [22] [24] [26]), confirm this fact and found that in the school context where the majority of principals are male and very few are women. This gender disparity in educational management and leadership is not only experienced in India, but in many other countries too. Hence, many researchers ([1] [3] [5] [10] [18] [21] [24]) have attempted to find some explanation for nonparticipation of women in elite leadership positions, usually by focusing on the obstacles women face attempting to obtain a positions of power and influence and the literature review reveals several different obstacles for women's lack of success in entering elite leadership positions. N. Mithali also written in her book entitled “women in school leadership” that ‘in India women are under-represented in school leadership positions and most of the time they are under-estimated of misrecognize as a school leader [21]. As a teacher, they are accepted but when coming to school leadership positions they are leverage for the selection’. Thus, we know about women in leadership roles, how they obtain their positions, and how they have become successful, the greater the likelihood of increasing the numbers in the field. Hence it is suggested that ‘there is a growing need for research on women in educational leadership in developing countries and there is little literature available in India who explores the gender perspective in educational administration functioning in educational organizations’ [22]. Hence, it is worthwhile that examining traditional definitions of leadership, women's experience in leadership positions and their leadership functioning are important to understand in the scenario of modern educational reforms. Special attention to women's leadership experiences in leadership was considered by many researchers worldwide. However, there is a dearth of Indian studies, in this regard. Thus, the present study was tried to identify and explore the leadership barriers faced by women secondary school principals in Bilaspur District of Chhattisgarh state.

Objective: To explore the leadership barriers faced by women school principals, particularly because of their gender.

Research Design: Qualitative method was used to explain and elaborate leadership issues, and challenges faced by women higher secondary school principals.

Population and Sample of the Study: The population for the present study has been identified as all the women higher secondary school principals working in government and private schools situated in Bilaspur District of Chhattishgarh State. To select the sample of the study, a purposive convenience sample of ten experienced higher secondary women school principals were selected. Convenience sampling is used in some case studies because the purpose of the study is not to estimate some population value, but to select cases from which one can learn most. All the participants were drawn from the urban and rural locality schools of the Bilaspur District of the Chhattishgarh state.

Research Tool: An in-depth semi-structured interview were conducted with all selected school principals with the focus on examining and exploring the women's subjective experiences and learning about the following: the women's career paths; internal and external motivations for the way in which they carry out their leadership roles; obstacles encountered when performing the duties associated with their position; coping mechanisms; consequences and personal and professional rewards of their administrative performance; characteristics and styles of management; and their perception of how they perform their administrative tasks and responsibilities. Semi-structured interviews are compatible with feminist ideals in that they offer women the chance to speak out on the issues that concern them and to construct an agenda on matters of central importance rather than the researchers imposing their own views on them [20]. All the interviews were held in the interviewees' offices during working hours except for one who opted to have the interview conducted in the evening at her house. Each interview session was roughly 30-45 minutes long. It was assumed that spending an equal amount of interview time with each interviewee ensures consistency which leads to trustworthiness of the study. Further, in interviews, it is important for the researcher to record as much detail as possible [14]. Therefore to capture detailed sets of notes during interviews and observation was used in order to enhance the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data collected. For data analysis, data were grouped according to themes.

Data Analysis: The qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interview schedule were analyzed with the help of inductive data analysis of the Strauss and Corbin (1998) steps for sequentially coding and grouping subsequent codes were followed by the researcher.

Result and Discussion:

Respondents Women Principals Characteristics:

All ten women principals selected for the study were working as full time school principal and no one as in-charge principal. Six out of ten women have currently been married, three were widowed, and one was unmarried. In terms of type of school, seven out of ten women were working in government school and three were in the private school. With respect to locality of school, six out of ten women respondents were from rural locality whereas only four were from urban locality. In terms of caste, seven out of ten were from unreserved category and three from culturally disadvantaged group. Further, with respect to their type of spouse, all six married women principals had working spouse and in terms of their type of family, six out of ten had nuclear family whereas four had joint family. In terms of their education, five out of ten had post graduation with B.Ed. degree, while other five had post graduation with M.Ed. degree. The ages of the respondents women principals ranged from 32 years old to 68 years old. As far as teaching experience is concerned it ranged from 07 to 23 years. Similarly, experience of principalship is concerned the minimum was of two years; however the maximum was of 30 years.

Result and Major Points:

The content analysis of the interview generated material clearly showed that women school principals faced barriers. The barriers, they experienced, can be classified into following major themes; cultural belief and gender stereotype, struggles with balancing between family and work, encouragement and support, administrative and work responsibility, isolation and marginalization, leadership styles and personal qualities and lack of training and educational opportunities.

Cultural Beliefs and Gender Stereotypes

Nine out of the ten women principals expressed that their subordinate staff and community members ignore the value and role of principals. The participants felt that, in general, society viewed females as persons who could not manage certain tasks and situations. This often results, for example, in teaching staff especially male teachers and non-teaching staff undermining the authority of female teachers and humiliating them. Several women principals mentioned that as women they find it difficult to exercise authority over male subordinates, particularly if they are male chauvinists. The responses expressed by these women principals as "*adhikam school me purush principal hai aur adhikansh shikshak purush principal ko hi principal mante hai, wo mahilao ke bato ko ansuna kar detey hai. Meray school ke purush shikshak bhi meri baat nahi suntay hai aur apni baat manwanay ke koshish karte hai. Mujhe school ko manage karne kay leye mujhe kabhi kabhi unki anuchit baat bhi swikar karna padti hai*" (men dominated in principalship positions, and most of teachers accept the authority of men as school principals, they do not take orders from women principals. in my school, male

staff members also pressurized me for considering their point of view).

Further, few respondent opined that the perception of women not being appropriate for a leadership role was a frequent notion they encountered. These women described various experiences that indicated that they were not valued as leaders. They claimed, people suggested women do not have the abilities to lead and they also reported being ignored at times because of the perception that what a woman says does not matter. For instance, they mentioned that “*Mere school me shikshak aur student late aate hai aur unhe jab iskey bare me kaha jata hai to woo kuch nahi suntaey hai aur apni manmani kartey hai*” (In my school teachers and students are always coming late and when I ask them, they ignored me). The following sentiments also mentioned by some of the respondents that “*Samajik parivesh bhi mahilao ko prabhavit karta hai, jaisay ki wah pariwar mai patni, maa aur workers adi hai*” (Social background also influences — women as they play multiple roles — e.g. wife, mother, worker, etc). “*Hum aisay pariwar may baday huai hai jaha mahilai leader nahi hoti hai, yeh hamay prabhavit karta hai*” (We have grown in such families where women were not leaders, so this affects us”. “*Humay lagta hai hamay led kiya jana chahiyei*” (We feel we should be led). “*Mahilaye apnay nature may bold nahi hoti*” (Women are not usually bold). “*Mahilaye manti hai ki wo naturally lower hai aur wo manati hai ki purousho ko hi leader hona chahiye*” (Women feel inferior naturally and believe that men should be leaders). In addition, the following was also said in another respondent “*Adhiktar mahila shikshak mantay hai ki pracharya ka kam purosho ka hai. Samaj mai mahilao pad nimna hai aur mahilao ko apnay pati say uccha pad per nahi hona chahiye*” (most of the women teachers feel that principalship is men’s positions. Culturally we should be lower. Women do not want to have higher positions than their husbands).

Similar finding reported by study of [27] revealed as, “Many of the women talked about the frustration of not being heard as women leaders” (p. 463). These women principals expressed the view that men were able to get things done but there was a reluctance accepting a woman as leader. This speaks to the whole issue of male privilege. Many studies [7] [8] [9] [11] [18] have been reported similar conclusion that many societies privileges only males as good leaders and it is not easy for women to access the principalship because they do not fit the norms. In brief, women are believed to be unfit for principalship positions, not only because they are believed to lack the traits for effective administration, but also because the norms of their society hold that their traditional roles conflict with the demanding requirements of their jobs and those they would have low job commitment. The responses above reflect that some women see leadership roles as something not meant for them as women.

Struggles with Balancing Between Family and Work Responsibility

Balance between family and work responsibilities were addressed by most of the women principals. In this respect, respondents expressed that: “*Mein apney parivar ko aadhik samay nahi de pati ho, mera beta abhi 12th class mein hai, usko meri jarurat hai, par school ko bhi mujhe chalana hai, kabhi kabhi lagta hai ke mein apney betay ke sath accha nahi kar rahi*” (I am not giving proper time to my family, my child is in class 12th and he needs my attention but due to my work responsibility I feel guilty). Another respondent said that “*Parivar ke jawabdari hamesha hi mahilao ka kam mana jata, chahey woh working ho ya nahi, parivar ke purush member hamesha hi is jawabdari se mukth rahtey hai, mujhe aaj bhi school se aanay ke baad ghar ka kaam karna hota hai aur khana bhi banana padta hai, parivar mein koi meri madat nahi karta hai*” (The responsibility of a family is always on the women not on the men after I finish school job, I still prepare food for my family, nobody help me).

Opposite to above, about one third women principals opined that they seldom face such type of problems because they had their mothers and mother-in-laws to help with their children. Due to their family and especially strong support from their spouse, most of them were able to maintain a healthy balance between work and family. Obviously, in order to maintain balance between their professional and personal lives, the women need support. Most of the married women agreed that their partners were their main supporters. One women principal said that “*Meray husband bahut acchay hai jo ki meri bahut sari parishani ko door kar detay hai. Mujhay lagata hai agar meri saadi nahi bhi hui hoti to bhi mai itni acchi tarah say kaam nahi kar pati jaisa ki abhi kar pati hon. Hamara rista bahut accha hai jiskay karan main sabhi kaam itni acchi tarah say kar pati hon*” (My husband is so nice, who “tolerates a lot of the stuff.....I think if I would not have been married to such a nice person, I could not have performed my duty in such a sound manner). Another woman principal mentioned that she also finds support from her colleagues, but admitted that it took a while before she felt comfortable asking them for help.

Similar barriers for women administrator i.e. family and home responsibilities, including the major responsibility for child and home care was listed in a number of studies [2] [4] [5] [11] [13][24].

Regarding this fact, [13] has conducted a study and found that one of the most significant and agreed barriers for women was managing both family and work responsibilities. Further, [19] found that women educational managers perform a dual role. They have to manage two ‘fronts’: family and work. In comparison to male educational managers, they have more responsibilities. Furthermore, they have peculiar types of restrictions from family and society. Study of [24] from her research findings rightly concluded that:

“The home and family responsibilities provide obstacles for women in administration in two ways: the women not only must effectively juggle all of her task, she must also contend with the bulk of male school board presidents and superintendents who erroneously believe that not only is she unable to manage the balancing act but that it is inappropriate for her to even attempt it” (p.113).

Lack of Encouragement and Support

So far the encouragement and support are concerned, half of the women principals pointed out that they receive little or no encouragement to seek leadership positions, while men are encouraged to enter into the administration to a greater degree than women. For instance, respondents mentioned that, “*Mahilao ko bada kaam karnay kay liye encourage nahi kiya jata hai*” (women are not encouraged to do greater roles). Some women principals expressed that they were encouraged by parents who are either teachers themselves or who considers that teaching is a good job for women. Similar finding reported in their discussion on barriers women face in leadership positions, [16] said that compared to men; women receive little or no encouragement to seek leadership positions. There are also few social networks (formal and informal) for women such as membership in clubs, resulting in a lack of recognition that leads to advancement.

Further, majority of them said that their entry into school principalship as a career was by drift or luck. These phrase said by women principals as “*Meray pahley say koi yojana nahi thi bas kismat is field may le aye hai* (I am lucky to be a principal but I did not have any plan for this post). Another women principal said that “*Mujhay meray parents ne suggest kiya ke teaching job karkey mein apnay family aur job dono ko balance kar sakti hoo, lakin is kaam me bahut samay dena padta hai aur puri planning hona jaruri hai*” (my parents encouraged me that teaching is a profession in which I can handle both my family and job. But, after coming in this profession I feel that it’s difficult task for a women, it needs well planned career decision). However, few respondents also expressed that their families supported their decisions for most of the time, but did not actively encourage them to seek promotion. These women decided to become school principal because they wanted to bring about change, wanted to face the challenges, which usually stand in front of an educational administrator. Few of them also mentioned that they had been encouraged to apply for principalship by their colleagues and administrators.

Further, the importance of encouragement and support can be seen in light of studies [2] [9] [12] [22][24] indicating that the women who have decided to pursue administrative careers, most of them have become successful because of the support and encouragement of others (e.g. husband, mother, father, principals, college professor etc.). In her study, [11] [12] also found that women teachers are more likely than men to be encouraged by people outside school and the same trend has been found across other less developed economies and ethnic

minority groups living in industrialized countries. However, [9] in their study in Zimbabwe, for instance, found that all women described being pushed into principalship by others. Therefore, most of the women principals mentioned and agreed that unavailability of structural support for women teacher are another major barrier for women who are willing to take leadership role in schools.

Administrative Barriers

About half of the women principals opined that too much administrative responsibility is another barrier for them. For instance, responses expressed by them as: “*School mein bahut kam karna hota hai, kabhi staff meetings to kabhi parent’s meetings sath hi sath bahut se sarkari yojnao ka school mein sanchalan karna aur uskey progress ko uccha adhikaryo ko samay per batanapadta hai. Mujhay samajh mein nahi aata hai ke mein school sanchalit karao ya sarkari yojnao ke progress report purna karo*” (We have a lot of responsibilities in the school like organization of staff meeting, parents meeting, monitoring of class room teaching along with other government schemes running in the schools. Some time we are in trouble whether to manage the school or to prepare the reports of various government schemes in a proper manner). Majority of them also reported that lack of time is one of the issues for school management. In this respect, nine out of ten women principals claimed that issues like time have created stress in both their personal and professional lives. For instance, respondents said that “*School principal honay ke karan kabhi kabhi uccha adhikariyo ki meetings mein school say door jana hota hai aur meetings key liye bahut sari tayari karni hoti hai aur aadhik samay tak office work karna hota hai, is karan apnay swayam aur family ke leye bilkul samay nahi milta hai*” (As a school principal, I have to attend the meetings. Some times for this I work hard and travel for away from my school. As a result of which t do not get much time for myself and for my family too).

Additionally, majority of the women principals had mentioned that teacher absenteeism is another major problem to them. They expressed that “*School mein shikshak bina kisi purve suchana ka anupasthit rahtey hai, jiskey karan school sanchalan mein samasya aatey hai*” (the teachers of my school were remain absent in sometimes without any prior information, as a result of which it is difficult to manage school activities and class room teaching). Similarly, about half of the women principals opined that regular organizing class room teaching is another because their staff members are not cooperative, lack of subject teachers in the schools and most of the students do not follow the rules and regulations of the school. Regarding this fact, maximum number of respondents expressed their view that “*Meray school me subject teachers ke kami hai, jiskey karan kabhi kabhi mujhey bhi class teaching karna hota hai taki school sahi tarah se chalta rahey*” (on account of lack of subject teachers in school, sometimes principals take the classes). Few women principals also mentioned that they were facing the problems

related to students' misbehavior and non-cooperation of parents in the school activities. For instance, they opined that *"School mein student bhag jate hai, parents ko bataya jata hai par vo dheyan nahi detay hai"* (Parents are not seriously taking the complaints of their child).

Additionally, six out of ten women principals opined that late coming of staff and students were another issue for them. They expressed that *"Mere school me shikshak aur student late aate hai aur unhe jab iske bare me kaha jata hai to wo kuch nahi suntae hai aur manmani karte hai"* (In my school teachers and students are always coming late and when I ask them, they ignored me). Another principal said that *"School me shikshak late aate hai aur jaldi chale jate hai, mai bhi city se aati hon is karan mujhay bhi kabhi kabhi late ho jata hai, iss paraysani ks pratidin mujhsy samna karna hota hai"* (every day I face the problems like my school teachers are coming late and leave the school before time, sometimes I also come late because I have been coming from city. So, this problem I face in most of the days).

Maintaining Distance

About one fourth of respondent women principals indicated that they do, at times, feel isolated – from colleagues, parents and staff. Many spoke of being misperceived because of their position. The following responses given by the respondent: *"Jab aap ek prashashak ho jatey hai to aap kuch logo kay vichardhara ko nahi badal saktay hai. Is karan mujay staff aur student say alag thalak rahna padta hai. Lakin yah prashasak kay prati vichardhara kay karan hai. Mujhay is vichardhara say bahar aanay kay liye bahut mehnat karni hoti hai"* (You don't change but often some people's perception towards you does once you become an administrator. I have only felt this isolation from staff and students. But it is usually due to stereotypes held of administrators. It requires a lot of extra work to try to break down those perceptions). Few respondents also posit that they face barriers because of their caste. For instance, the response noted that: *"Maray staff member yeh mantay hai ki mujhay yah job meri caste ki vajah si mili hai. Aur kuch doshray staff member yeh mantay hai ki mai abhi naye hon aur maray pass abhi paryapt anubhav nahi hai"* (Some staff members thought I had received the job because I belong to minority category. Others thought, I am too young and do not have enough experience. Some thought a woman cannot do as good a job as a man)

There were three women principals who complained that due to lot of work they are isolated from the staff. They expressed that *"Maray school mai aadhik kaam honay kay karan mujhay meray staff kay saath samay nahi mil pata hai"* There were two women principals who reported that they have been feeling lonely and isolated in their jobs. They also tend to suffer social isolation and marginalization from their community and staff members.

Some of the previous studies conducted by [4] [10] also noted that females who attain school leadership positions tend to suffer social isolation and marginalization as they pursue their careers. For example [4] studied on the topic "Barriers to upward mobility in international schools for women administrators" and examine the barriers to upward mobility faced by female administrators working in American and International Overseas Schools and how these women perceived selected barriers. The finding of this study shows that Women find psychological separation and alienation from the rest of the group difficult to experience.

Leadership Qualities

The majority of women principals in present study believed that women manage better than men. It is found that co-operation and collaboration are the words frequently used by women to describe their own management style; as well as seeing themselves as being part of a team with the staff; being a servant leader to staff, students and the community are also important for them. Many of the respondents felt that a positive, trustworthy, and open relationship are needed with the staff. Regarding this few respondents mentioned following statements:

"My priority is to build a relationship with the people around me to establish a level of trust"

"It is very important to me to support and encourage others and being creative in ways to do so"

"I do not hide behind a desk because I believe it represents too much authority and my door is always open"

"I believe on encouragement. I believe on affirmation performance based activity rather than criticism.

Five of the ten women expressed listening as being a key part of their leadership. For instance, one respondent mentioned that "I am good listener and this helps me for build relationships with staff and community members. Another women principal expressed an understanding of how important it is as a leader to make sure that listening is part of one's style. Some respondent opined that enjoying being in control was reported by six of the ten women. Reports of knowing the chain of command, following rules, and paying attention to detail were all discussed in association with having control. Seven out of the ten women talked about empathy being part of their leadership style. One respondent said that "...if I see them hurting, then I try to hurt with them." Another expressed that being empathetic was something that is also part of her leadership style. Further, she specifically described herself as being positive, flexible, caring, assertive, and supportive. One respondent's principal sees herself as a mother figure and talks about how her willingness to help people has really changed as she has gotten older. She said that having compassion and empathy has helped her take time

to deal with her employees. She also thinks that she has more empathy than men who hold her same leadership position.

Few respondents also think that women tend to have more empathy than men. They described empathy as being more inherent in women than men although they do recognize that is a stereotypical statement. Other styles mentioned in the study were having kindness and respect, being empowering, leading by example, and having a good sense of humor.

Additionally, most of the women principals used consensus and collaboration when making major decisions in the school. They stated that the administrative team made most decisions. A few women noted that they or the administrative team as a whole would indicate to the staff the direction they would like to take but ultimately used a democratic method for decision-making. However, two responded that they made all the decisions and few respondents did mention that it depends on the situation and the type of decisions is being made.

Further, when asked what qualities they brought to their administrative role, the women used fifty-one adjectives in total to describe themselves. Their perceptions ranged from hardworking, being good with a budget and being organized to being caring, gentle, nurturing and compassionate. The top qualities mentioned were: being organized (10), enjoying people, especially children (10), having a sense of humour (9), being a good listener (8), being compassionate (7), life-long learning (5), being committed to education (4), being sincere and hard working (4), and being collaborative (4).

Lack of Educational Opportunities

There were six women who have reported a problem of not having adequate administrative training, experience, and educational opportunities to prepare them for leadership positions. They also mentioned that our education system fails to encourage and motivate women to seek promotions early in their careers. Regarding this fact, the view expressed by respondents as “*School system mai mahila shikshako kay liye training aur workshop ka programme nahi hota hai, is karan say mahilao ko aadhik problem face karni hoti hai*” (in our educational system, there is no special training and workshops for women teachers). Several studies [15] [17] [18] [22] [23] [24] reported similar conclusion, in which women have less human capital investment in education, training and work experiences than men. Additionally, [17] posit that under-representation of women can be attributed to women’s lack of aspiration for administrative positions even though they hold certification and degrees to qualify them for these positions. Inadequate training and educational opportunities, insufficient support systems for and among women, family responsibilities, and mobility problems are some of the other factors which are directly or indirectly associated for under-representation of women in educational administration and leadership positions.

Major findings of the study: Majority of respondent women principal agreed that they were managing their schools

perfectly and better than men principals. However, some of them also said that they faced problem in managing day to day activity of their schools to some extent. The barriers, they experienced, can be classified into following major themes; cultural belief and gender stereotype, struggles with balancing between family and work, encouragement and support, administrative and work responsibility, isolation and marginalization, leadership styles and personal qualities and lack of training and educational opportunities.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY:

On the basis of analysis and findings of the study, following implication of the study is as follows:

- There are specific challenges faced by women higher secondary school principals, particularly because of their gender. Therefore, special in-service training programmes need to be organized for the higher secondary school principals and preference should be given to the woman principals.
- It is expected that the results of this study may help to shed light on the under-representation of women in secondary school leadership roles in India and to provide some of directions that could be pursued to address this imbalance. Results may also provide an indication of what additional steps need to be taken to address teachers’ motivation for pursuing the leadership roles. For authorities the results may be used for policy revision within the Indian educational system.
- The finding of this study also suggested that women should have a clear understanding of the challenges what they have been facing in the school system. These challenges includes cultural belief and gender stereotype, struggles with balancing between family and work, encouragement and support, administrative and work responsibility, isolation and marginalisation, leadership styles and personal qualities and lack of training and educational opportunities. Therefore, prior to pursuing careers in educational administration, women should have a clear understanding to sort-out these challenges and be sure that their families understand the time factor and emotional stress inherent in the field of educational leadership, as a result of all these they become effective leaders.

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