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Promoting Female Primary School Leadership in Ethiopia: Countering Culture

Tizita Lemma Melka, Turuwark Zalalam Warkineh and Jill Sperandio

Abstract: *This study sought to identify the factors contributing to the ongoing under-representation of women in primary school leadership in Ethiopia with the larger aim of developing recommendations for interventions to rectify this situation. A qualitative research plan was adopted that sought to identify factors through an examination of the lived experiences of women principals in primary schools in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia's third largest city. Data were collected from interviews with 20 women serving as principals, vice-principals and teachers, analysis of documents at the national, regional and district level and observations at seven primary schools in Bahir Dar. Findings suggest that cultural factors including gender bias regarding leadership, and socialisation of girls for domestic roles and responsibilities that limit aspirations, combine with structural and institutional factors that make leadership positions difficult to access for women. These include gender bias in appointment and transfer procedures, lack of support and training at district education office level, the lack of a transparent career path, and appointments to schools that present greater challenges specifically to women.*

Keywords: Ethiopian education, primary school principals, educational leadership, under-representation, affirmative action, grounded theory

Introduction

Women continue to be under-represented in school leadership worldwide, including countries associated with well-developed school systems, high levels of gender sensitivity and long histories of female education and activism. Social justice demands that men and women be equally represented as teachers, decision makers, and leaders at each level of an education system. But few counties have achieved this goal and most face an over-representation of women in teaching positions, and disproportionately low numbers of women progressing to a career in school leadership.

In many developed countries, the trend of the feminisation of early years and primary/elementary school teaching has resulted in the over-representation of women in school leadership at this level, but under-representation continues at secondary and tertiary levels. For example, in the USA, slow gains were made by women from 1991-2008 when female principals in U.S. public schools increased from 52 per cent to 59 per cent at the elementary level, from 22 per cent to 29 per cent at the secondary level and women in the district school superintendent position moved from 12 per cent to 25 per cent (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young & Ellerson 2011). The most recent statistics show women occupying 66 per cent of the elementary school leadership positions in an area of schooling where male teachers are becoming a rarity, but little gain in leadership positions at the higher levels of schooling (Taie & Godring 2020). In the United Kingdom with a similar dearth of male primary school teachers, women hold 71 per cent of primary school leadership positions but only 38 per cent of secondary principal positions (Fuller 2017; UK DfE 2021). These trends suggest that women may only be gaining greater representation in leadership as a result of the absence of competition from male candidates.

In developing countries, among them Ethiopia, under-representation of women in school leadership is frequently more extreme (Lopez & Rugano 2018; Oplatka 2006; Zikhal & Smit 2019). In these countries with high unemployment and competition for jobs, or a history of excluding women from education and the formal workplace, men may not only dominate leadership positions but also teaching positions. When this is the case, developing a pool of women with the education, teaching experience and aspirations and motivation to take on school leadership is a priority for countries committed to gender equality. This process can be helped or hindered by government policies, the organisational structures of the education system and the socio-cultural environment of the country.

The Study

In Ethiopia, the focus of this study, women compose 40 per cent of primary school teachers, 18 per cent of secondary school teachers, 9 per cent of teacher education instructors, 16 per cent of training and vocational education trainers, and 9 per cent of faculty members in Higher Education institutions (Ethiopia MOE Statistics 2016). Yet women comprised only 9.4 per cent of primary school principals and less than 1 per cent of secondary school principals at that time. More recently, The Ethiopian Education Sector Development Program V1(2021-24) (Ethiopia MOE 2019) noted, 'The proportion of female school leaders (principals and vice-principals) decreased from a baseline of 16% (2014/15) to 11% (2018/19) at the primary level and from 14% to 18% at the secondary level' (p. 15), listing the increase in the participation of women in school management as one of the goals of the program.

In Amhara Region, where this research study was undertaken, only 70 women primary school principals and vice-principals out of a total of 1875 were reported in the 2019-2020 school year, with 59 female secondary school principals and vice principals in the 939 positions

available (Ethiopia MOE 2020). Given the governmental goal to place women in 30 per cent of all government-financed positions including school leaders in line with Global Millennium Goals, and to adopt affirmative action procedures to help further this goal (Ethiopia MOE 2013a, 2013b, 2018), the continuing dearth of women in school leadership requires explanation.

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors contributing to the ongoing under-representation of female primary school leaders in Ethiopia through an examination of the lived experiences of women who had taken on this position. Focusing on the school district of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia's third largest city, the study sought an answer to the following question: How do the experiences and career plans of female primary school principals in the Bahir Dar school district explain the under-representation of women in these positions? The researchers undertook the study with the basic assumption that women are as capable of leading societal organisations as men, and that having equal numbers of men and women involved in educational policy making and implementation through schooling is a social good and a social justice issue. The larger aim of the study was to develop recommendations for interventions that could hasten the movement of women into primary school principal positions to contribute to future gender equity in school leadership in Ethiopia in line with government policy and goals.

Relevant Literature and Conceptual Framework

Interest in the under-representation of women in educational leadership developed in the 1980s and 90s in the USA and the UK when a number of feminist researchers documented the barriers that existed to women moving into leadership positions, using primarily qualitative research techniques (Brunner 1998; Coleman 1996; Grogan 1996; Shakeshaft 1989a, 1989b). Given the small number of women holding leadership positions and the lack of gender-differentiated educational statistics in most countries, researchers, guided by critical feminist theory, feminist empiricism, standpoint epistemology, postmodernism, and post-structuralism, sought to record the lived experiences and give voice to women who had accessed and were practicing leadership or who aspired to do so (Adams & Handbright 2004; Hess-Biber & Leavy 2007). The studies from the USA were primarily focused on the position of school district superintendent but expanded to include principals at the elementary (primary) and high school level. The research studies revealed a situation where women were confronted by discrimination and bias at the organisational level and were hindered in their aspirations by personal confidence issues and domestic expectations stemming from societal conditioning and stereotypes regarding women, their capabilities and responsibilities (Sperandio & LaPier 2009).

The research from the U.S. prompted similar studies, at first in other developed countries, among them New Zealand (Brooking 2004) and Canada (Reynolds, White, Brayman & Moore 2008), and then more globally including studies from Turkey (Celiktan 2005), Malawi

(Kadzamira 2006), Greece (Kaparou & Bush 2007), South Africa (Moorosi 2010) and Uganda (Sperandio & Merab Kagoda 2010). All illustrated a similar pattern of under-representation. However, the factors responsible for it appeared to differ in importance dependent on the organisation of the education system, political leadership and local culture.

Examining the existing studies, Sperandio (2010) took a grounded theory approach to the development of a model of the factors identified and their interaction as they affected the path of educational leadership for women. She argued that past studies in the field had focused on identifying barriers and opportunities that were gender sensitive, but with increasing interest in the need to be proactive in drawing women into the field of educational leadership, a research framework that allowed for meaningful comparisons between contexts to identify commonalities and differences was needed. Such a model would help identify those areas where interventions could most usefully be undertaken to the benefit of women aspiring to a career in educational leadership, and to predict the potential outcomes of such interventions. Understanding the culturally determined interaction of social and institutional factors that create unique contexts for career building is a prerequisite of developing leadership preparation for women designed to increase their successful entry into, and practice of, school leadership and to rectify their under-representation in this field worldwide. The model has framed the data collection and analysis for this study.

Ongoing studies of women's experiences in their journey to the principalship and educational leadership in general have drawn on career development models such as Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett 1994) that have been used for assessing outcome expectations, personal goals, and self-efficacy in cases where women are able to make decisions with regards to career choices unhindered by issues of limited access or constrained aspirations. The effect of career stage or school level of a principal/prospective principal on aspirations and access has also attracted attention (Duncan 2013; Oplatka & Tamir 2009). Research by Leathers (2011), Sperandio and Devdas (2015), and Walker (2013) have charted the changes in women's choices and approaches to education leadership in the USA. The ongoing challenges that women face while developing careers as school principals and the leadership styles and coping mechanisms they have developed have been examined by Arar (2019) and Arar and Abramovitz (2013) in the Arab world, Airin (2010) and Gaus (2011) in Indonesia, Lumby (2015a, 2015b) and Davids (2018) in South Africa. In Ethiopia, Narrowe (2008), Mitchell (2015), Lodesso (2017), Gobena (2014) and Tesfaye (2007, 2019) have examined issues around primary school leadership and women's lack of participation in this, noting patriarchal attitudes within society that discourage women from envisioning themselves as leaders, and practical issues around time-consuming expectations of women in the home, larger family and community.

The Ethiopian Context: National, Regional and Local

Female Education in Ethiopia

Traditional Ethiopian education has a rich history of literature and philosophy dating back to before the 13th century. Charting the educational history of the country Milkias and Kebede (2010) note both Christian and Islamic cultures provided traditional education in churches and mosques. However, women were not allowed to attend religious schools, or progress beyond basic reading and writing. Modern education was introduced at the end of the 19th century and girls were allowed to attend schools but followed separate and different curricula from boys. When comprehensive high schools were introduced in the country following the American school model in the early 1960s, admission to the academic and industrial streams was closed to girls who were channelled into secretarial or home economics. By 1974 there were 1,300 primary and secondary schools in the country, but only 10 per cent of the primary student population and only 2 per cent of secondary students were girls (Milkias & Kebede 2010).

A World Bank (2005) study of education in Ethiopia noted post-1974 changes in the education system and girls' education within it. From 1974-1991 military and Marxist governments expanded access to education but at the cost of quality. The planned development of the education system faltered due to famine and civil war. By 1991 only 30 per cent of children were enrolled in primary school, with participation rates for girls far lower than boys. A new government came to power in 1991 committed to social justice, and in 1994 published an Education and Training Policy, which included a special focus on girls' and women's education. At the same time the 6-2-4 system of schooling was replaced by the current 8-2-2 system (World Bank 2005).

The government initiated efforts to enhance awareness of the importance of girls' education in local communities, and to make schools more girl friendly by constructing separate latrines and assigning female teachers and head teachers to provide girls support. Girls' clubs were established in schools and tutorial, guidance and counselling services provided to female students. These measures paid off as girls' and boys' enrolment and participation through the primary cycle reached parity in 2015 (Ethiopia MOE 2017), although regional disparities continue to exist. However, dropout rates for girls at the secondary levels of schooling are high, as are failure rates in comparison with boys at the national grade 10 and 12 examinations that determine entrance into higher education (Joshi & Verspoor 2013).

The Constitution of 1995 enshrined, after much debate, an affirmative action policy to correct the age-old marginalisation of women in Ethiopian society. This included a quota reserving 30 per cent of places in teacher training courses and university courses for girls, resulting in an increase in female teachers – most noticeably at the primary school level (Tesfaye 2007). However, teacher and school leadership recruitment to meet the 30 per cent goal advocated

by the Millennium Development Goals and endorsed by the Ethiopian government as encouraging the aspirations of female students still has a long way to go (Tesfaye 2018, 2019).

Women’s Status in Ethiopia

Women’s rights to property as well as equality in the family, as stipulated in Article 35 of the Constitution together with the affirmative action policy has been lauded as the biggest victory of the Ethiopian women’s movement (Zewide 2014). But while Ethiopia now has a woman president, appoints female government ministers, chief engineers, and construction workers in small numbers, household surveys still indicate that domestic chores are still the responsibility of women and domestic violence against women is commonplace and still widely regarded as acceptable (UNODC 2020). In rural areas, women gather firewood, walk many kilometres to fetch water, sell goods in the market, work on the farm and prepare food and take care of children. Early marriage for girls, and genital mutilation that puts women at risk in childbearing are still issues in many regions. In the cities, widespread poverty forces even primary school girls to be involved in sidewalk enterprises to raise money after their half-day school sessions are complete.

Schools and Schooling in Bahir Dar

Bahir Dar, the third largest city in Ethiopia, is situated at the southern end of Lake Tana and has a population of 750,000 in its urban and surrounding rural area. The city has a small tourist industry centred on the UNESCO-recognised biosphere of the lake, the ancient monasteries situated on islands in it, and the source of the Blue Nile and the Blue Nile Falls. It is the centre of the administrative and cultural region of Amhara and has federal and regional administrative offices together with an airport that provides five one-hour flights a day linking it to the national capital of Addis Ababa. Bahir Dar houses a large federal university that serves 55,000 students housed on numerous campuses around the city. It is surrounded by a fertile agricultural area producing a variety of crops and animal products, with many rural primary schools serving the agricultural population.

The regulatory framework for governance and management of the school system has emerged from a number of government documents issued since the current government came to power, including the Education and Training Policy (Ethiopia MOE 1994); Strengthening of the Management and Administration of Schools (Amendment) Proclamation 217/2000 (Ethiopia MOE 2000); Directive for Educational Management, Organization, Public Participation, and Finance (Ethiopia MOE 2002); Continuous Professional Development Directive (Ethiopia MOE 2009), and various letters (directives) issued by Regional Education Bureaus. The 1994 Education and Training Policy noted, ‘Educational management will be democratic, professional, coordinated, efficient, effective, and encourage the participation of women’ (Ethiopia MOE 1994: 30: 3.8.3)

Ethiopia is a federal state with elected governments at the regional levels. The regions are divided into administrative areas called zones. Zones comprise a number of woredas, and kebeles are a subdivision of a woreda. The 2002 Directive for Educational Management (popularly known as the Blue Book) sets out the duties and responsibilities of those leading the educational system: The Ministry of Education (MOE); the Regional Education Bureaus; The Zonal Education Office; The Woreda Education Office; schools (at each level); education and training management boards at the woreda, kebele and urban area levels, and parent-teacher associations (PTAs). It also defines the major functions and responsibilities of the following positions: school supervisor, principal, vice-principal, teachers, and students. The federal government has been actively pursuing a policy of decentralisation to the regional and woreda levels, and woredas now have full authority to allocate funds, to create teacher and school leadership positions, fill those positions, and take disciplinary action relating to staff.

The Education Sector Development Program (ESDP IV) (Ethiopia MOE 2010) lists the development of teachers and school leaders first among its priorities for improving the quality of primary and secondary education. Primary teachers attend Colleges of Teacher Education (CTEs) which train teacher for the first (grade 1-4) and second (grades 5-8) cycles of primary education. As of 2010, all primary teachers are required to complete a three-year diploma which they begin upon completion of grade 10 in school.

In Bahir Dar the Woreda Educational Office advertises vacant school principal and vice principal positions, conducts a pre-screening of applicants' professional careers to date including visits to their schools, administers an examination to qualified applicants (those who have the academic qualifications and teaching experience) and selects a candidate. At the primary school level, leadership positions are the principal (director), vice principal, subject head teachers (department heads) and student activity leaders.

The Primary Schools

There are currently 41 primary schools in the city. The schools visited in the study typically served populations of a thousand students, in two shifts comprising grades 1-4 and 5-8 (5 to 12 years of age). Despite their urban or sub-urban location, schools frequently had large areas of land around them, used for playing areas, or for grazing cattle. Typical classrooms were of mud and straw construction with corrugated metal roofs and limited natural light, with seating on benches and tables for 50-60 students. There was a chalk board at the front of the class, government-issued textbooks, and classes conducted in a mix of Amharic (the regional language) and English.

Most schools also housed groups of special needs students – typically hearing or visually impaired with a specialist teacher, but also physically or mentally challenged students. A number had more modern buildings that they had acquired through donation or partnership with international organisations or Bahir Dar university community service projects – these

ranged from a three-storey classroom block built to modern standards, to non-functional eco-latrines, laboratories, a library, and vocational studies workrooms. One school had a cow barn with 12 donated milk cows to provide milk for the breakfast program for socially disadvantaged students who receive milk and bread each morning at all of these schools. Similarly, all schools offered a girls' club that provided a space for menstruating girls to go for privacy, and weekly meetings for all girls which provided encouragement and empowerment activities, often with donated materials.

The Female Principals

In 2019 the schools served 66,037 students and employed 1,138 teachers of whom 731 were female. There were seven female principals and two female vice principals serving in the city primary schools. Formal job descriptions provided by the district education office together with school observations confirmed that the school principals are expected to attend both morning and afternoon sessions of the school. Among other responsibilities, their role involved preparing the annual work plan and budget for the school, facilitating the teaching and learning process through monitoring the teacher lesson plans, teacher evaluation, and reporting student outcomes on the standardised tests. They must arrange and oversee extra-curricular activities and student support services. An important aspect of the role of principal is the need to work with the PTA and other stakeholders to ensure the school environment is safe and enhance the learning environment.

Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis

This was a qualitative research study, employing the gathering of information and statistics from government documents, interviewing of key informants in schools and district offices, and observation of the environment of primary schools. The researchers, two female Ethiopian professors from Bahir Dar University, and a visiting U.S. professor with extensive experience as a school principal and in international education, brought to the study both insider and outsider perspectives. Currently serving female primary school principal and vice-principals were identified using the district education office records. Snowball sampling led us to ex-principals and female teachers qualified to be principals. The researchers undertook semi-structured interviews with the women currently holding leadership positions that not only provided data for the research questions, but provided further key informants – women aspiring to leadership, qualified to take on leadership positions but not aspiring, and women who had experienced leadership but no longer held leadership positions

The interviews with female participants took place at the primary schools, and while the two Ethiopian researchers conducted interviews in Amharic, the third member of the research team toured the school, observed lessons and engaged in informal conversations with teachers. Recorded interviews were transcribed in Amharic by graduate students at Bahir Dar

University, and translated to English. In all, 11 interviews were undertaken, comprising seven serving principals, two serving vice-principals, two ex-principals still working in the schools and one ex-vice-principal. Details of participants interviewed are given in Table 1. Transcripts were read and reread, coded, and coded elements grouped into categories and themes, with constant comparisons with the variables of the grounded model, in line with the goal of distinguishing the factors that interacted together to promote or limit access and aspirations of women to primary school leadership in Ethiopia.

Table 1: Demographics and Qualifications of Serving Principal Participants

Principal	Age	Marital Status	Children	Qualifications
1	43	Married	2	Diploma in Math, BA Math(ongoing); BA-EDPM (2018)
2	32	Single	0	Diploma in Amharic language; BA Pedagogy,
3	31	Married	1	BA science, MA Psychology
4	36	Married	4	Diploma in civics; BA-EDPM
5	30	Married	2	Diploma in math; BA Management (ongoing)
6	31	Married	1	Diploma in social science; BA Geography (ongoing)
7	43	Married	2	BA Amharic language

Results and Interpretations

Key Themes

Analysis of the individual stories of our participants revealed common themes that linked in turn to the major categories of our grounded theory model (Figure 1) and the variables contained within them. The five major themes listed below capture the essence of the working lives of the principals, vice-principals and ex-principals and vice principals we interviewed. They speak to the tensions between a national commitment to gender equity and ongoing societal beliefs about the inferior abilities and status of women and their need to fulfil domestic roles. They also show how personal characteristics of determination, commitment to social justice leadership, creativity and imagination, ongoing self-education, and a willingness to empathise with and support those around them made them outstanding principals by modern standards despite the lack of official training and district education

office support and the challenges presented to them by their own families and friends, students, teachers and the wider school community.

1) Low self-esteem: Social beliefs

Most of the participants explained that they had not considered becoming principals in part because they did not believe they were capable of doing it. Typical comments included:

I had no experience, no training so I was afraid that I would mess things up. (1EP)

... everyone (all female teachers) are afraid of the principal's job. No one wants it as they assume it will lead to failure ... they don't do things just by daring like many men do. (P5)

When you think about taking this job, society, including your friends ... all question your capability saying it's better not to get into this if you can't accomplish it. When I continuously heard such ideas, I started to doubt my decision, I questioned if I was not really capable of doing well in this position. (3P)

A serving principal pointed out those feelings of inferiority to men continued even after successfully serving as principal. She complained:

During the meeting there is no female principal who raises her hand to speak or ask questions. This is because we have low self-esteem. When we are meeting at the educational office similarly most of the time the men principals and the supervisors talk. Not the women. They don't unless called upon. We will speak when we are called to speak about our own school. ... we need others to respect our rights in terms of benefits too. But instead of fighting we prefer leaving or quitting. Because we are weak. (P5)

Other women referred to the cultural conditioning that led to their reluctance to take leadership positions, which they did only with the support of a respected male relative or colleague: 'I knew that I would be successful if I got the position. But I didn't dare to apply. I only got the confidence when he [her male principal] encouraged me' (3P). Explaining why she was one of only three female applicants for a large number of advertised vacancies, another principal noted, 'Women holding leadership positions is not that much supported in our culture' (P4), a comment echoed by others: 'I believe the reason why women don't apply is that there is a belief that women are not able to do it' (3P).

2) Need to prove themselves: Determination to succeed

Our participants stated their determination to confront and disprove societal beliefs that they, as women, would fail in leadership positions. Comments included, 'People say that "women cannot do this" and I just wanted to get this idea out of their minds. I wanted to show that woman *can* do this' (3P). Another participant stated, 'The education office insisted that I should continue in the position because they believe in me ... and I thought, if they believe in me, I have to work hard and prove them right'. She continued, 'I was always at the school, including the weekends. I wanted to show the people who said that I am not capable, that I

am capable, and I can work' (1EXVP). A principal explained that, after bringing about massive improvements to her school, the district attempted to transfer her to another. She resisted.

I told them that I will not go anywhere, and as a principal I had the right to stay. When we argued I was so angry with this unfairness I couldn't help but cry. But it also made me strong. I was determined to get what I wanted. I wanted so badly to show them that I can work. (P6)

Another principal found herself appointed to a school in a community with very traditional views about the roles of women:

The community did not want a woman principal. They believe women principals cannot work at all. They ignored me ... When I observed this, I dropped everything I had planned to do at home and gave priority to the school. I arrived there early in the morning and worked tirelessly the whole day. As they saw things change, they slowly started to change their attitude. (P2)

But it was not just school communities and district officers that the principals had to convince and impress. Many expressed the hurt of having those closest to them – parents and husbands – endorse traditional values rather than supporting them in their opportunities to be contributing members of society.

My husband didn't take me seriously at the beginning. I asked him for some tips on leadership as he was in a leadership position. He said, 'it is not possible for you to lead others'. I was so angry, and I told him that I am no less a person than him. If he can do it, I can do it too. (P6)

Most of the principals were able to win over the sceptics in their families, often with the help of other family members – uncles, cousins, and brothers. Many used their new-found independence, and the status the principal's position afforded them, to support family members including younger brothers and sisters to get educated and to avoid the early arranged marriages many of the principals themselves had been forced to accept. Their ability to prove to themselves and others that they were as capable as men was a source of pride and satisfaction to all the principals, perfectly expressed in this quote from the interview with Principal 3:

At the top of everything that I have done, I showed to everyone, as a woman, that I can work equally or even better than men ... There are schools run by men and there are schools run by women, and anyone can compare and see that we do equally as well as men. And I am very happy with that.

3) Family commitments: Demands of the job

Without exception, the school leaders in our study recognised the tension between the demands of their positions and the demands of their personal life. Principals work a full day and often attend meetings, or cover evening events at the school and in the community, unlike

the teachers who work a half day and have half a day to conduct their personal affairs. Descriptions of this tension followed a similar pattern. P3 noted:

The work is demanding, it needs time, huge effort and going through the ups and downs. It distorts your social life, and it's very important that others understand that. My family lives in the city and is supportive. But at the beginning, it was difficult. I spent my whole time working and my social life was non-existent.

While many of the principals were able to employ household help, this still did not free them from the expectation that they will be there to manage the running of the family home. While noting that she had maids, one principal complained:

I leave my home early morning and come back late in the evening and there are many things that remain undone because I don't spend time at home ... I have a maid in the house but there are many things that need my presence. My husband complains about my absence from home, he always asks why I am staying there the whole day till the evening ... My social life is almost non-existent ... I am unable to go to funerals, or other social events if these happen in the week. (P1)

An unmarried principal who confided that she found her domestic chores manageable, nevertheless noted the long hours required for the principal position and that this left her no time to be ill or look after her health. To illustrate this, she related how 'one time I was sick and went to hospital, they told me it was typhoid and right after that I went to a meeting carrying all the medicine in my bag'. She went on to describe how despite having no husband or children to spend time with, she still had little time to see her other family members who live within easy reach of her school: 'My family live in Bahir Dar, there are many times I come here to the education office but go back without meeting my parents' (P2).

A mother of two explained:

The work is not that difficult, but it just doesn't fit with the roles and duties I have at home ... Being a principal demands too much of your time, it makes you sacrifice too many things and that doesn't go down well with the family. ... When you work as a principal you may be requested to be in some place urgently when you had other personal engagements to perform. (P4)

This principal and others who were married with children expressed appreciation for the support offered by their husbands. The principal described how 'we both share the work we have in the house; he takes responsibility when I have to leave for meetings. It is difficult but he understands ... He supports me very well' (P4).

4) Personal gains, successful school initiatives: Lack of support or encouragement from district officials

All the interviewees, regardless of whether they wished to continue in educational administration, could point to personal gains, growth and empowerment from their ventures into leadership. Principal 2, for example, notes that she gained the skill of understanding –

learning from the people around her and also the skill of being patience: 'You need it to manage these diverse behaviours'. She draws tremendous job satisfaction from the work she does:

I love to work for the sake of the children, for the community ... and what I have gained is the love from my students and the society. I earned their respect through time, and I am happy with that. I am really satisfied when I see the students change, learn and benefit from school, when I see the teachers are doing their jobs without being driven, working at everything as if it is for their own benefit because I solved their problems. (P2)

She is also rightly proud of the more concrete gains she has achieved for the schools in which she has worked. She expanded her first school from four to eight grades to reduce the distance local children had to travel to school especially benefitting girls; obtained materials for and upgraded the second school suffering from neglect; took on a new school lacking resources and undertook improvements to the physical plant including concrete floors, electricity, solar panels, and building toilets. Principal 2 claims the principal position has made her happy and satisfied and she thrives on the positive feedback she receives: 'It is just a huge thing when others talk about the time I was principal in their schools, praising that time'. She has short term aspirations of making her school a 'model' school and 'right now I feel very optimistic' (P2).

Principal 3 has a similar self-awareness of what she has learnt from the challenging position. She believes, 'I have a large heart and I am able to see things from three or four angles'. She also points out that 'having worked as a principal I will never be afraid or scared of anything ... I believe I can handle and survive any challenge' (P3). She is confident in her ability to run the school well, hold her own with her male peers, and handle difficult or disrespectful members of the community and teachers. She notes:

I worked hard once I got in, so I was doing my job effectively. There was not a year when I didn't get an award. This year my school is recognised as a centre of excellence.

In common with all the principals, she can point to an impressive list of school improvements.

I developed a project and submitted to the mayor's office. It was approved and the children got to sit on chairs. I feel happy when I think about this ... I mobilised the community and started to feed the children coming to school without breakfast.

She was able to get a water supply laid on to the school, and a herd of cows donated to it housed, fed and producing milk for the breakfast programme. She notes proudly:

This school was No. 1 for being the most ignored and the most uncomfortable from all the schools in the city. Now it is No. 1 for the opposite reason. (P3)

Principal 6 worked for many years in a rural school. She related how she worked with health and agriculture extension workers there to educate the farmers about HIV/AIDS and getting

the children to stay in school. She tells with pride how many of the children made it through school to university and to this day thank her for making them stay in school. When it was time for her to leave the community and move to the city:

The whole society including the religious leaders gathered to honour me and gave me a Maria Theresa silver dollar, a ton of corn and Teff (the grain used to make local bread) and their blessings. The parents still refer to their children as *my children* because I forced them to stay in school. (P6)

When asked about personal growth, she cites her understanding of the need to develop your own capacity, in her case through reading every night, and of asking questions to expand her knowledge. She concludes: 'I know now leading means enabling oneself. I have gained a lot. And I am really happy' (P6).

But while the principals recognise the personal empowerment they have gained from undertaking the job and the enormous satisfaction they have derived from empowering communities, students and improving schools, they note less positive relationships with the district education office. The principals universally complained that although many of them had been head-hunted to take on difficult schools, they received no training and little support: 'There is no planned program intended to build our capacity' (P1). Some gave examples of implicit bias in the district office. Principal 1 related her conversation with a district officer who told her they didn't encourage women to apply for the principal position because it was difficult work and women might not know how to handle the problems. She concluded: 'They have a preconception that women cannot do this' (P1).

Other principals had more serious charges. These include blocking opportunities for the principals to transfer to more attractive schools despite their success and hard work with their initial difficult assignments, failure to recognise qualifications that would lead to pay increases and improve opportunities to compete with men for more highly prized school positions, and insensitivity in making it difficult to resign and return to teaching when health or family issues required the female principals to do this. At best the selection procedures operated by the office and the distribution of opportunities to attend meetings and conferences were seen by the women as gender neutral, at worst as biased in favour of male principals and friends of the district office officials. None of the principals saw the office as actively encouraging women in general or taking measures to ensure equal numbers of male and female principals or going out of their way to retain high performing women. Many complained of lack of encouragement or recognition of the office, requiring them to do tasks such as settling community disputes which were part of the office's responsibility, and in some cases being publicly critical of their performance as principals.

5) Mentors: Negative role models

All the female participants in the study took seriously what they believed to be their responsibility to support the careers of other women and draw more women into leadership.

P3 stressed:

I am a woman and I need the younger women to follow my steps. So, I tell women principals that being a principal is not a difficult task ... I encourage not only women teachers but also the female students – support them to become team leaders in 1-5 peer-led groups.

P4 had been pro-active in bringing women into leadership positions in her school. She noted:

When I first came here the vice principal was a man. When he transferred to another place I made a huge effort to make my vice principal a woman. Here priority is given to females to become department heads, unit leaders. Last year of the 9 department heads 6 were women, as were the two unit leaders. When people visit the school, they are amused that the school is being led by women.

Regardless of their encouragement and support, most of the principals realised that there was little to attract women to the position, and they themselves could be reinforcing the teachers' perceptions of the position as too demanding and poorly rewarded. An ex-principal currently working as a teacher described covering for her female principal during the principal's maternity leave and trying to convince the principal not to resign. She noted that few experienced teachers would consider becoming principal – the very small difference in salary is not equivalent to the work you are required to do. She concluded: 'I think that I have sacrificed a lot in the past, and I would not advise other women to become principals'.

P6 encourages her female teachers to consider becoming principals.

I would like for them to become principals. I tell them that the work is not that difficult but the teachers respond that they see no benefit and they like their half-day schedule that allows them time to take care of domestic responsibilities or engage in other income-generating activities. They look at how I am doing and they decide they don't want that. (P6)

Principal 1 stated that none of the women teachers at her school with the qualifications to become principals would consider applying, despite her encouragement of them to do so. She explained, 'they feel sorry for me and are very concerned about me. They know how much I get paid, and they see how much time I spend at work'. Principal 2 echoed these comments.

My female teachers don't want the position. They even advise me to resign, as they know the stress and other negative feelings I go through. They say that 'to be a principal is like burning in hell'.

Only one principal in the group of 10 serving and ex-primary school leaders envisaged an upward moving career path for herself. When asked about her future aspirations, P6 told us she hoped to become a secondary school principal, and then a supervisor in the school system (where there were no serving female supervisors), and eventually take a position in the education office. An ex-principal who had been called by the district office with a request to take a principal's position again rejected the offer. She explained:

I will be happy to give a hand and support principals in different ways, but I will never be interested in being a principal again. I neglected my son when I was a principal. Now all I want is to take care of my second child, love him and support him in his studies. (1EP)

While several of the principals in successful schools were happy to remain in their positions but saw no benefits in becoming supervisors, others were actively seeking to return to teaching. A principal of a highly successful school confided that her health was declining because of the stress and long work hours of the position, and that she was receiving death threats from squatters she was attempting to move off the school property (despite the fact she had found them alternative land to settle). P2, who had worked hard to improve a failing rural school, said she would only consider remaining as a principal if the district office recognised her achievements and transferred her to an urban school with fewer problems. All the principals admitted they had considered retiring from the principal's position at one time or another, but the personal satisfaction they gained from the successes they achieved in the schools kept many of them working, despite the lack of external benefits and the sacrifices made in their personal life and relationships.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Bahir Dar school district may or may not be representative of other school districts in Ethiopia, and further research studies are needed to establish whether the same themes and patterns in female representation at the principal level, and women's experiences in the position, are similar across Ethiopia. Assuming that they are, the perceptions of the participants in our study suggest that there is clearly a problem to be addressed at the national level concerning remuneration for the work done. Principals are currently paid little more than teachers but expected to work a full day, attend meetings and community events in their own time, and field the problems at the school from stakeholder groups – students, teachers, parents, and the community at large. There would seem little incentive for anyone – male or female – to take this position on when they could teach, which raises a second question demanding research: Why is the position of primary school principal attractive to men? Our female participants suggested that men are more adept at tailoring the position to their own lifestyles, spending fewer hours at the school, and delegating work to others. In addition, men are not bearing the responsibility of organising a home, maintaining family social circles and raising children, the second unpaid job that most of our participants were expected to continue to do.

A second demotivator for women to take on the principal position is the national and district failure to delineate a clear career path that involves movement from teacher to vice-principal to principal to supervisor and then to district office positions. Clear expectations of length of service in each position, training and qualifications for the next step up should be well-publicised. In line with national goals for gender equity, district offices should be informed

of the need to meet gender quotas within a given time frame for principal, supervisor and district office positions.

A third problem appears to be the introduction of an Educational Policy and Management B.A. degree, which while good preparation for principals, does not allow holders to take time out from administrative positions and return to teaching, where they need a subject or grade level qualification. For women, who may need to take advantage of a shorter day during childrearing, or care of infirmed family members, the option to stay in the schools as teachers, and ultimately to return to the principalship when domestic responsibilities are lighter, is an important motivator. For districts, having teachers who have experienced the principalship is also an advantage. Our participants suggest that such women frequently mentor and assist new principals and continue to undertake activities that benefit the school beyond their teaching responsibilities.

District offices must recognise that the few women who do put themselves forward to undertake leadership in district primary schools are highly motivated to lead for social justice, creative problem-solvers, community-builders and resilient on a personal level. They should be nurtured, rewarded and honoured to encourage more women to consider taking on the position. District officials may see their policies and procedures as gender neutral and conforming to government requirements. However, from the perspective of women in the schools and who have battled to retain their positions despite lack of training, requirements to work in sometimes dangerous rural positions, and who face public humiliation at the hands of district officials with open or implicit bias in favour of male candidates, district officials are perceived as non-supportive and in denial about the challenges and sacrifices any woman in a public position in Ethiopia must anticipate. With the increasing devolution of power from national to regional and district education authorities comes the responsibility to come up with solutions to ongoing problems. The lack of women in local education systems, at the principal, supervisor and district office level is clearly a problem that has negative implications for the empowerment of girls and women throughout the country and requires immediate attention.

While the under-representation of women in educational leadership is common to many education systems throughout the world, the causal factors for it in any given country reflect local culture and conditions. Ethiopia has made an impressive start to addressing the problem of under-representation by establishing clearly defined expectations regarding women gaining access to leadership, and promoting and funding programmes to help them. However, the devolution of management to local authorities requires that these be held accountable for ensuring that women are empowered and enabled to access leadership positions and educated as to how to do this.

Countries such as Ethiopia, newly addressing the challenge of equality of opportunity for women, can learn much from the experience of others in both the developed and developing world as reported in the research literature and recommendations of global organisations

devoted to women's empowerment. A commonality in this global experience is the importance of listening to the voices of women experiencing, or attempting to access, leadership roles. This study in Bahir Dar suggests that local authorities would do well to listen to the voices of women employed in the education system to understand how local culture and conditions can be mediated to promote able women to leadership.

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