LEADERSHIP AND GENDER: AN EXPLORATION OF TWO FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS' LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES IN INDIA

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Abstract: *Administrative leadership, both within and outside educational contexts, remains a male-centric field. Female leaders often are evaluated based on male leadership characteristics, a practice particularly evident in India's education sector. In India, only 35% of academics are women and even fewer are represented in leadership positions. This paper explores the experiences of two women working in administrative leadership positions in two Indian high schools. Interviews and questionnaires provided insight into how they perceived their opportunities, experienced barriers, and understood the impact of gender discrimination on their lives. The findings of this study are anticipated to encourage and provide insights to women who may aspire to assume academic leadership positions in education.*

Keywords: educational leadership, societal discrimination, work culture, socio-cultural context

Conceptual Framework

Internationally, only 3% to 4% of women occupy Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions (Sherwin, 2014). In 2012, women held just 3.8% of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies (Bailey, 2014). Although a vast amount of scholarship documents women's underrepresentation in senior leadership positions (Bailey, 2014; Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011; PEW Research Center, 2015; Seo, Huang, & Han, 2017), researchers disagree about "whether there are fewer women leaders because they're less effective at the job, or because society expects them to be" (Bailey, 2014, para. 1). Despite dominant stereotypes that men are more effective leaders than women (Cueto, 2015; Prime, Carter, & Welbourne, 2009), women have increased their leadership presence in administration and in business ownership (Antonaros, 2010). While improved opportunities and changing perceptions suggest that women will secure more leadership positions in the future (Antonaros, 2010), they currently continue to experience systemic discrimination, educational inequity, and everyday harassment (Douglas, 2012; Prime et al., 2009; Sharma, 2016).

In 1993, UNESCO reported that women held less than 50% of academic and administrative posts in higher education institutions and were mostly represented in lower level academic and middle management positions (Dines, 1993). More than two decades later, statistics show minimal improvement, particularly in leadership positions where women remain globally underrepresented. Although the number of female students has grown internationally from 10.8 to 77.4 million between 1970 and 2008 (UNESCO, 2010) "the dramatic increase in the number of women students has not been matched by growth in the number of women in senior leadership roles in universities" (Morley, 2013, p. 1). More women than men enter the teaching profession, but in most countries, women occupy few senior leadership and management positions in education (Coleman, 2007). This disparity is particularly evident in India where females frequently are treated as subordinate to males and receive fewer educational opportunities than their male counterparts (Haque, Palacios, & Tavares, 2017). In the Indian context, research highlights that women who enter administrative positions consistently face harassment, discrimination,

and exclusion (Agarwal, 2011; Kumari, 2014; United Nations, 2003).

Women's underrepresentation in educational administrative positions limits knowledge about women's leadership characteristics, practices, and effectiveness as administrative leaders. Dunn, Gerlach, and Hyle (2014) explained that "[u]ntil recently, most of the scholarly work on leadership, both inside and outside the academy, was conducted by men and focused on male leaders" (p. 9). Masculine norms and leadership practices serve to exclude women. The persistence of "male-centric leadership models and norms have served to limit women's aspirations regarding leadership, as well as their access to leadership roles" (Dunn et al., 2014, p. 9). Despite women's potential to be effective and transformative leaders, their administrative talent and leadership capabilities remain underutilized (Morley, Berma, & Hamid, 2016).

> The underrepresentation of women in senior administrative positions in academe… is problematic, in that it results in the waste of administrative talent at a time when higher education faces serious challenges that will be met only with strong, effective leadership. The challenges call for new ways of viewing the core mission, how higher education will be funded, how instruction will be delivered, and how findings from research will be disseminated and applied. Women possess great potential to be transformative leaders in the academy at a time when their talents are much needed. Because they have not been socialized in accordance with the male-centric leadership model, they are relative outsiders who must forge new ways of leading. (Dunn et al., 2014, p. 9)

The difficulty women experience attaining leadership roles in educational institutions is a recurring problem in India where women occupy only 3% of vice chancellor positions. In

India, such a problem is complicated by the cultural perception of gender-appropriate behaviour where hegemonic masculinity dictates assumptions about who should hold positions of authority and leadership. Women remain associated with the domestic sphere, which affects their chances of entering positions of power (Morley & Crossouard, 2015).

Effective leadership remains a key theme in administrative management literature and is regarded as a critical factor in the performance of secondary and tertiary level educational institutions. This paper focuses on the experiences of women administrative leaders in senior high schools in India. The following research question guided the study: What are the major challenges faced by women in educational leadership in India? The paper argues for a paradigm shift within educational institutions and society to create opportunities for women in leadership positions.

Research Method, Participants, and Data Collection

A qualitative approach was used in this study. Qualitative methods help researchers seek answers to specific questions, systematically make use of predefined procedures to answer research questions, gather evidence, and produce findings that can be applied beyond the immediate boundaries of a study (Merriam, 2009).

The study was delimited to two female principals from senior secondary schools in the Rewari district of Haryana. Both participants were older than 45 years, worked in positions of leadership in the Indian education system, and were employed in senior secondary schools. At the time of the study, both had been employed as principals for less than 5 years.

Data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. The

questionnaire collected demographic data and information about women's experiences, challenges, and perceptions of equity and gender-based administrative leadership in India's high schools (Appendix A). Interviews provided respondents the opportunity to elaborate on themes that emerged from the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory method was used to analyse and interpret data. In a grounded theory approach, data is collected, indexed, and explored again as new topics and questions relevant to the study surface. The method is particularly useful for uncovering underlying assumptions, contexts, and experiences of those involved in a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). The goal of grounded theory is to provide theoretical explanations as they emerge from the empirical data.

Findings and Discussion

Minimal Opportunities for Women in Administrative Leadership

Participant responses highlight the limited opportunities available to women pursuing educational leadership positions where men still dominate. They saw this challenge as due partly to the underrepresentation of females in the field. For example, one respondent referred to the *All India Survey of Higher Education* (Government of India, 2013) to highlight the impact of this disparity. The survey provided a disaggregated analysis of gender in India's education system. It revealed that in 2013, women accounted for only 35% of academics in the country while only 25% were professors or occupied professional positions (Government of India, 2013; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). Both respondents explained that their inability to obtain administrative positions until they were in their forties speaks to the minimal opportunities available to women in the field. Although some opportunities for women in administrative leadership positions may exist in India, women must demonstrate considerable drive, ability, and tenacity if they are to challenge barriers, develop their professional skills, and achieve success.

Participants explained that their early career achievements, which included roles such as education centre director, committee chair, senior teacher, student leadership program director, and assistant principal, accelerated their opportunities. Participants recognized that in India their achievements are atypical, as few women obtain the minimum qualifications needed to move through the ranks and obtain administrative leadership positions. They also acknowledged that they were fortunate to have been raised by families that encouraged women's educational and professional development – an experience they did not take for granted at a time when India is only slowly moving away from traditional practices that encourage boys to seek education more than girls, and where gendered stereotypes continue to relegate women to household chores and domestic duties.

Both respondents claimed to know women in their respective institutions who received lower ranking positions because of their gender. They also explained that many of their male counterparts do not approve of women holding senior leadership positions, including their positions as principals. They described their schools as spaces where women are consistently treated less favourably than men on performance appraisals and receive fewer opportunities for promotion, leadership training, and career development. As one respondent clarified, "It is not that women are unwilling to apply for these positions...but rather, it is the Indian culture that has programmed people's mind to believe that the only place for a woman is at home tending to the needs of their man." For these participants,

the school and societal culture impede women's opportunities and limit their ability to successfully discharge their duties.

Barriers to Successful Female Administrative Leadership

When asked whether they had personally experienced harassment, one respondent explained that she received abusive messages from a male teacher after she had rejected his curriculum change proposal.

> He told me it was not in my place to speak against his wishes [since he was] a senior teacher in the school, and my position in the institution did not mean that I am in any way better than him. He really made my work difficult and he was always in opposition of my proposals and suggestions during school board meetings.

This experience highlights how opposition and harassment can compromise how women in leadership positions discharge their duties.

The paths to successful administrative leadership for the respondents were quite divergent. One respondent desired an administrative career very early in her life and worked to build a credible resume that would eventually secure her such a position. The other respondent did not have a clear roadmap of her career, but made the most out of the opportunities that she was presented with. Both respondents agreed that they had to work extra hard in order to be noticed – work they also perceived as necessary to improve their reputations and encourage more women to seek leadership positions. As leaders, they demonstrated great passion for and commitment to their craft, were self-aware of their positions in relation to being women, and demonstrated the self-confidence to stand out in a male dominated society. Both expressed concerns about the disparity between the number of male and female teachers, even though this was not the case in their institutions. They acknowledged

that gender equity is an essential element of successful leadership, something they hoped to achieve as they moved through their careers.

Both respondents alluded to the fact that their success as administrative leaders depended on showcasing specific achievements in the education sector. For example, one respondent successfully launched new units and academic programs, while the other increased enrolment in her school and obtained accreditation for the subjects taught in her institution. While each of these examples are valuable achievements that can help advance one's career in educational leadership, participants also recognized that their success and promotion required more than strong performance and achievement. They also felt pressured to present their personal and professional identities in ways that challenged the gendered expectations held by their male colleagues and subordinates. Expectations that leaders be authoritative, committed, unemotional, and unburdened with primary caregiving responsibilities shaped and defined their leadership styles.

Impact of Societal Gender Discrimination

Both respondents agreed that gender discrimination in India remains a major issue of concern. Irrespective of how much they contribute to their household income or to the country's economy, they felt they were rarely treated with the same respect as men. Although they were both relatively successful, respondents experienced regular opposition from male co-workers and struggled to garner support from colleagues. Given these ongoing difficulties, they understood why many women would not seek administrative leadership positions. For example, one respondent explained that a female staff member turned down a promotion to be a subject head because she was the only woman in her department and did not believe she would be supported by her male colleagues. Participants felt that the sense

of entitlement among their male counterparts presented challenges that were difficult for many women to overcome. During an interview, a respondent claimed that compared to her male colleagues who were awarded leadership opportunities based solely on their performance and their potential for success, she was analyzed based on various additional factors including whether or not she had children, whether she could work for long hours, how people reacted to her, and whether or not she was authoritative.

Conclusion

For those who achieve success and enter leadership positions, gendered barriers do not disappear. Although participants pursued and managed to secure administrative leadership positions and claimed to have received more equitable treatment than many women in India (e.g., in recruitment, selection, and wages), they routinely faced and witnessed opposition from their male counterparts that impacted their performance appraisals and promotional opportunities. Participants explained that they were harassed, discriminated against, and doubted by male colleagues, which at times compromised their ability to execute their duties. The findings highlight the ongoing challenges and discrimination women face in educational leadership positions in India (Agarwal, 2011; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). They also underline the effects of gendered and cultural stereotyping on women's ability and choice to obtain additional educational qualifications, seek professional development, and pursue administrative leadership positions.

Gendered discrimination is a limiting factor when it comes to assigning women to administrative positions because it subjects women to more scrutiny than their male colleagues. The challenges women face likely will persist until society becomes more receptive towards gender equality, affords women equal opportunities, and models success for girls and young women to follow. Moreover, increasing women's presence and impact in administrative leadership also requires reforms in the education system so females have access to educational opportunities that allow them to compete and pursue these positions in the first place.

This study emphasizes the need for female teachers to appreciate and believe in their ability as administrative leaders, for the teaching fraternity to re-evaluate how it awards administrative leadership positions and addresses gender disparity, and for the field of education to recognize the impact of cultural and gendered bias on the educational and occupational experiences and aspirations of women in India. We call for further research that includes larger sample sizes to explore the gendered experiences of women in administrative leadership positions in India.

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