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WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN THE ISLANDS OF FIJI

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Abstract:

A cursory glance over the gender-wise statistics of teachers in primary and secondary schools reveals startling picture of school leadership. Women, being more in numbers at teaching level, do not get selected in leadership positions. And this is true for India, Fiji, the UK, Canada and the USA. What are the probable barriers which deprive women of their rightful roles at leadership positions? How can we tackle these problems? These research questions are discussed in the present paper in the context of Fiji Islands. A total of 72 in-service teachers were included in the study. On the basis of a well-planned and meticulously prepared questionnaire, the case of women school leaders is elaborated and explained in the paper. The participants' responses to open-ended questions, in form of primary data, are also included in the paper.

Keywords: Women leadership, social barriers, discrimination, men's club, dual standards.

Introduction

Classifying the humanity through gender is the first step to leave out some from the power circle. Race, ethnicity, color, etc. are the further, lesser offshoots of the classification between powerful and powerless. Cutting across the ages, nations, professions, women have been denied the rightful position in the hierarchy. These positions are due to them according to their skills and intellect. For positions related to authority, leaderships, women are often marginalized and overlooked. Position and leadership are often termed as synonymous of masculinity (Schein, 1994, 2001). After witnessing the muscle flashing, sword swinging leaders for centuries, the role of leaders even in a sophisticated 21 century organization is to exert prowess and behave aggressively. Studies and statistics show that women are proportionally under-represented at management level (Ruijs, 1993; Eurostat, 2003). A glimpse over leadership demographics in any profession, business or walk of life makes it clear as the daylight that women don't get equal opportunities to hold the leadership positions.

The claim of equal opportunities for all loses its sheen when so call feminine professions like teaching fail to produce proportionate number of women leaders. Coleman (2002, p. 19) pinpoints the situation in the statement, "Women numerically dominate the teaching profession in most countries... but they hold a minority of the management positions in education". The situation is globally prevalent. In England 26% of the workforce are male (118,100) and 74% are female (330,000). Looking at head teachers, 35% are male (7,300) and 65% are female (13,800). Though women represent the majority of the teaching workforce in schools in England, they are disproportionately under-represented in school management positions (DfES, 2005; Hutchings, 2002).

Of the U.S.'s almost 14,000 school district superintendents, roughly 15 percent (approximately 2,000) are women (Glass, 2000). The disparity between who is leading schools and who's teaching the students is rather ironic since most teachers (72%) are women (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The situation closer home in Fiji islands is not different. Even when 57% of primary school teachers are women, only 22.5% head teachers are women. Similarly in secondary schools, 48% teachers are women, yet only 14% secondary school principals are women (Tavola, 2000).

In the last 3-4 decades the situation has been studied from various points of views. Cairns (1977) summarizes these two bipolar points of views as one where women were simply being discriminated against, and the second where not very many women applied for the available administrative positions. The detailed study of the causes for the situation would be done in the next section of the paper. However it would be apt to note that, "...as schools began to evolve into hierarchical organizations, the majority of positions of formal leadership positions were occupied by men" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 30). The roots from which this tree of discrimination sprouts is the centuries old concept that women are nurturers, caregivers and men are managers, decision makers. (Whitaker & Lane, 1984). The paper discusses the present literature on the barriers for women teachers. This discussion becomes the base for the questionnaire prepared. Further research processes and demography of the study is presented. The findings and analysis section of the paper reads the responses and interprets them. Finally, the conclusion of the study is given at the end of the paper.

Barriers for Women Teachers

There is no doubt in the fact that the opportunities are less open to the women teachers to become head teachers, principals than to men teachers. Even when the women possess equal qualification, experience and skills they have less probability to step the ladder of hierarchy in the school administration (Holloway, 2000). There was a time when these claims were rebuffed as flukes but statistical studies show that, "... the more administrative responsibility attached to the position, the less probability that the position would be held by a woman" (Cairns, 1967, p. 166). The reasons for this disparity in the representation are tried to be found in the women themselves and in the educational and societal environments. The barriers in the path of progress for women in the field of education are categorized as related to women's personality, skills and ambitions and the attitudes, prejudices of the school management and the society. Slauenwhite and Skok (1991) define these barriers as internal, external and androcentric.

However, it is evident that the external barriers are more severe and hard to overcome than the internal barriers. Society's perception of the women and their abilities is the most complicated and deep-rooted barrier to overcome. For the same kind of behavior women and men leaders get different responses from the society. If men leaders delve deep into a matter he is considered "good with details", but for the same eye for detail women leaders are branded as "petty" or "picky" (Marshall, 1985, p. 49). Men are "heroic", when they act whereas women are heroic only when they endure and sacrifice (Bascia & Young, 2001). Men of action are "assertive"; women who initiates are "pushy" or "aggressive" (Gupton, 1996, p. 67). Not only in contrast to men, are women in themselves assigned different, more submissive roles and attitudes in the social structures. That women must bear and raise children, nurture them is the role the society at large assigns to the women. When women become leaders, the society deems, they get distracted from this primary function. (Kennington-Edson, 1988). "In the gender order of Western countries teaching and socialization of young children has been considered as suitable work for women" (Gannerud, 2001, p. 57). But this ends here, the moment the women try to come out of this nurture-teacher role to become manager, authority, the society frowns upon them.

The barriers created by the faceless society are impersonal and thus are less disturbing. But when the woman's own family starts acting as a hindrance, the woman become stressed. Women as mother and/or wife already invest a lot of time and energy to fulfill these roles. And when they aspire to become leaders, a more time consuming role than being teachers, it puts strain on their familial roles (Bascia & Young, 2001; Hicks, 1996; Mahoney, 1993). Women have to bear extreme stressful situations as they strive to balance their family and professional commitments (Gupton, 1996). This stress, more often than not, nips the women's aspirations in the bud. The augmented work hours with the leading position in the school management deters the women from completing their duties as a mother and/or wife. It is very common for women to be forced to choose between family and professional life.

Women's gift, the ability to give birth to a child, also acts as barrier in their professional development. During and after the maternity process, women stay away from work for 01 to 03 years. After this period also, generally, women join the work as part time teachers. Only when the child starts attending school, the women are able to take full time assignments. In this process, they miss out on the required job experience mandatory for applying for the senior leadership positions. Also these breaks hinder the professional growth. Men, on the other hand, continue to grow and gain experience without any break in their careers. Therefore "When applying for a principleship, many women find themselves competing against younger males, with as much, if not more, recognized experience" (Ruijs, 1993, p. 578).

Apart from these barriers created by the society and family, the professional practices and ethos also create hurdles for women. Starting from the hiring and recruitment process of the leaders to the organizational policies created by the authorities related to the fulfillment of the responsibilities by the leaders, each step is advertised as the gender-neutral but in actual practices adhere to conventional patriarchal values. The male dominance in the decision making positions creates a vicious circle which doesn't allow the women perspective to alter/influence the rules and perceptions related to the selection process. The policies and processes which control the entry of professionals into senior management levels are created and tilted towards traditional male values. Through this fewer women become empowered to change the policies and pave the way for the coming generations (Blackmore, 1999). Demands for a balanced hired committee indicate that the selection process is often not unbiased. Going a step further, scholars like Tallerico (2000) asked for a mixed hiring committee including representatives from all genders, races and ethnicities.

The absence of women leaders at high levels does not affect the chances of future generation in the hiring process only. The budding women leaders also badly miss "same sex representatives upon which to pattern their career aspirations and goals" (Kennington-Edson, 1988, p. 61). The male dominance at the top of power pyramids deny aspiring women leaders the "widening circle of personal and professional references who can assist in the promotion of women as candidates for positions" (Pearman, 1999, p. 31).

The barriers for women in becoming school leaders, in the existing literature, range from 'blaming the victim', women's low aspirations levels to the biological factors, social and family structures and professional practices and policies. As the body of research in this phenomenon developed further it has been accepted that "women's psyche that is at fault and thus needs changing, but rather the social structure of society" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 556-7).

Research Process and Demographics: Tool and Sample

To understand the present perception of teacher on this contentious issue of women leadership a questionnaire has been given to them. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of literature review. Since it was a qualitative study, hence the validity and reliability of the questionnaire was ensured by including as many questions as possible (Appendix A). Further, to ensure the validity of the responses, some key questions were asked twice in the questionnaire with reversed framing of the concept. Again, to capture the qualitative data in its utmost capacity, some questions also had open-ended space for the responses.

The number of participants was 72. These teachers were in-service teachers from primary as well as secondary schools. 57 participants (80%) were women and 15 (20%) were men. Their teaching experience ranged from 02 to 12 years.

Findings and Analysis

The focus of the research is to understand the phenomenon of women in school leadership, the first question in the questionnaire tried to grasp of level of awareness about the leadership styles among the in-service school teachers. The question contained some statements related to work relations among school leaders (head teacher or principal) and school teachers. Statements were adapted from a questionnaire on leadership styles in all professions. For the validation of the instrument, the questions were put in the

context of schools and academics. On the Lickert-type scale the participants were asked to agree or disagree with the specific behaviors by school leaders towards teachers and their work. The statements contained behavior patterns of authoritarian and democratic leadership style. Of the 72 participants 40 strongly agreed with the authoritarian leadership style behaviours, the rest accepted the democratic leadership behaviors. Even statements like 'Teachers need to be supervised closely, or they are not likely to do their work' were strongly agreed upon by 70% participants. The explanation of this inclination expectation of less democratic behavior from the leaders could be found in the teaching-training programs being run in the country. The lack of exposure towards leadership skills and knowledge about the leadership theories can create situations where teachers are not interested in applying for leadership positions.

After the awareness about the leadership skills and types, the next concept to be studied was the awareness about the absence of women from the high positions. As is discussed earlier, the Islands of Fiji, following the global trends, have just one third women school leader when they are two-thirds of the school teachers. However to illicit the actual response of the participants and to counter the sweep-under-the-rug mindset of the society at large, the same question is asked in two different versions. As the placing of the questions is also important, both of these questions are scattered in the questionnaire. The second question of the questionnaire, 'Should there be equal numbers of male and female administrators?' and the seventh question, 'Do you perceive there to be a need for an increase in the number of female administrators in schools?' try to decipher whether or not the participants are conscious of the problem existed. Also to neutralize the effect of words used in the two versions of the question, their placed were swapped in half of the questionnaires. In some questionnaires Question 2 became question 7. As 80% of the participants were women, it was interesting to know whether the teaching fraternity and the most affected section, women teachers, understand the gravity of the situation. Whatever question came at the initial stage of the questionnaire, participants were in denial mode. For question 2, irrespective of the version of the question, only 30% participants said they feel women being deprived of leadership positions. 70% participants stated that they don't see the problem with less women representations at higher levels or they don't feel there is a need to increase their numbers. For the second version of the same question and by then the participants have already gone through 06 questions about discrimination against women, their acceptance level of the problem rose to 65%. Again, towards the end of the questionnaire, to catch the participants off guard a direct question was asked. The question was, 'Do you think women are discriminated in the school leadership selection process?' The response to this question, 80% agreeing that women are deprived of leadership positions due to several reasons, points out that the society at large try to adopt closed eye policy towards the culture of male dominance in the so called equal-opportunity playing field.

Whereas the above discussed questions were to understand the acceptance level of the teaching fraternity about the depriving women from authority, the next three questions were to understand the problem in more concrete terms. Question 3 was, 'Who is the most influential party in promoting equal leadership opportunity to women in education?' The participants were given six options 'Ministry of Education, School Management, Family Members, Society, Women Themselves and Nature of Job (More time, exerting)'. As the participants are part of the Fijian educational system, it was deemed to be helpful to understand what they think is the most influential party in bringing equality. They were asked to rank these parties/reasons according to their influence with number 1 to 6, 1 being the most influential and 6 being the least. Not surprisingly Ministry of education emerged as the most influential party, getting 55% share. The way schools rely on government for funds and financial assistance, most of the decisions related to academics and management are taken by the Ministry itself. So it was natural for the participants to think that Ministry of Education can influence the most. However, surprisingly, 38% of the participants think that women themselves are the most influential party. The blaming-the-victim mindset shows its face once

again in the analysis. The school management and society were ranked as the least influential parties. However the situation becomes clearer when in the next question, the participants were directly asked, 'In your opinion which of the following behave differently with women leaders than with men leaders?' The options given to them were, 'School Management, Colleagues, Students, Parents, Ministry and Others.' Now here school management and colleagues got the maximum number of yeses with parents at a close third place. In all, school management and society (colleagues and parents), according to the participants, behave differently with women leaders than with men leaders.

The next two questions were related to the probable barriers for women to become leaders in educational institutes and suggestions to make the situation better. The barriers and suggestions were given in form of statements. These statements were written after a thorough literature review. As is discussed earlier the barriers were documented as of two types, intrinsic (related to the women's personality) and extrinsic (caused by society, school management, government, nature of job etc.) The statements for both the questions were written for both the types of barriers. As the large majority of participants are women teachers who also may aspire to become teachers, these responses serve as the first hand study of the prevalent reasons. It was interesting to know which type of barriers exist dominantly in the Fijian context. In all 12 statements were given as barriers and 06 as solutions. After the analysis it was found that extrinsic barriers exist much more dominantly than the intrinsic ones. Two statements 'Informal male networks that females cannot break into' and 'Isolation of women at the administrative level' got recognition from almost 90% participants as obstacles for aspiring women leaders. As only 80% participants in the study were women, even 50% men participants of the study also think that male hegemony is the most severe barrier in the path of women leaders. In the same light, the solution that asks to 'Provide a widening circle of personal and professional references who can assist in the promotion of women as candidates for positions', in other words, change the exclusive nature of the decision making positions got the maximum responses. The barriers like nature of the job, family responsibility and personal doubts about abilities did not get much acceptance in the responses. Similarly, solutions related to these barriers like, 'Create policies in the work place that allow for on-site child care, flexible working hours, and parental leave so that parents can more effectively balance work and life' and 'Time commitment needed to be lessened' were not favored much by the participants. This shows that the ability of women to do the job in its existing form is not questioned. The responses got for these two questions show that the problem and the solutions lie more with the social and professional, formal and informal male dominated circles.

Apart from these designed questions, there are certain unexpected responses given by the participants in form of writing on the blank space given to write their ideas, views on the topic. Out of the 72 participants 16 participants (15 women, 01 man) wrote in the space given. These views serve as the primary data to understand the psychology of women teachers towards leadership positions and women's abilities. The only male participant who gave answer to the open-ended question reflected the typical male attitude towards the discrimination. He wrote, "I believe women are given equal opportunities and the only thing required is that they need to uplift themselves and change their attitude." It is behaviour like this that refuses to acknowledge that apart from skills and knowledge some other parameters also decide the selection of leaders. The discrimination is highlighted in one of the responses by a female participant:

Male colleagues in schools and other men in decision making places (sic) need to accept that women can make exceptional leaders. The notion of men feeling that taking orders from a female is unacceptable needs to be stop.

The similar attitude of undermining the women's leadership potentials is pinpointed in the next response:

Decision on educational administrative positions should not be gender based. The decision makers should eliminate the pre-conceived idea that women cannot do men's work.

One participant even suggested developing a gender-neutral transparent parameter to judge the leadership

skills and abilities of the aspiring leaders. The presence of more male staff at the higher levels of the hierarchy also put a performance pressure on the few women leaders. This pressure causes stress for these leaders and they deviate from their natural behaviour. This experience was shared by one of the participant, female teacher, who has worked with a women principal at a school.

Few female leaders that I have worked with were not confident in their decision making. They were more concerned about their chair/job security rather than serving students and teachers with their leadership skills.

Conclusion

The research project is an effort to understand the absence of women from higher positions (principals, head teachers) in schools when they dominate the middle level positions (teachers). Head teachers and principals are selected from the pool of teachers. What is it that makes women suitable to be a teacher and not a principal or head teacher? To understand this phenomenon 72 in-service teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questions asked in the questionnaire tried to understand the problem from various aspects. After the descriptive analysis of the findings it has been concluded that the existing male dominating culture, prevalent in the society at large, seeps into the educational system. The intrinsic barriers for women, blaming the women itself, her presumed lack of abilities or aspirational levels are rejected by the participants of the study. This finding of the research match with the latest theories developed recently about discrimination against women in higher places. In a way, the research study validates the importance to concentrate more on the extrinsic barriers, which is advocated in most the current literature on the women leadership.

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Appendix A

Women in School Leadership: Questionnaire		
<i>Gender:</i>	<i>Teaching Experience:</i>	
<i>Number of Schools You have Worked so far:</i>		
<i>Minimum and Maximum Number of Students at the Schools:</i>		
<i>Total Number of Principals, Head Teachers you have worked with:</i>		
<i>Number of Woman Principals, Head Teachers you have worked with:</i>		
Give your immediate impressions. There are no right or wrong answers.		
Likert-type scale (5 = "Strongly Agree"; 4 = "Agree"; 3 = "neither Agree nor Disagree"; 2 = "Disagree"; 1 = "Strongly Disagree")		
1	Imagine you are the school principal, head teacher of your school. According to the Likert-Scale given above, what do you think about the following statements related to the school leadership.	
	Statement	Response
<i>A</i>	Teachers need to be supervised closely, or they are not likely to do their work.	
<i>B</i>	Teachers want to be a part of the decision-making process.	
<i>C</i>	It is fair to say that most teachers in the general population are lazy.	
<i>D</i>	Providing guidance without pressure is the key to being a good leader	
<i>E</i>	As a rule, teachers must be given rewards or punishments in order to motivate them to achieve organizational objectives.	

<i>F</i>	Most teachers want frequent and supportive communication from their leaders.		
<i>G</i>	Most teachers feel insecure about their work and need direction.		
<i>H</i>	Leaders need to help subordinates accept responsibility for completing their work.		
<i>I</i>	The leader is the chief judge of the achievements of the members of the group.		
<i>J</i>	It is the leader's job to help subordinates find their "passion."		
<i>K</i>	Effective leaders give orders and clarify procedures.		
<i>L</i>	People are basically competent and if given a task will do a good job.		
2	Should there be equal numbers of male and female administrators.		
	Yes	No	Cannot say
3	Do you think women are discriminated in the school leadership selection process?		
	Yes	No	Cannot say
4	Who is the most influential party in promoting equal leaderships opportunity to women in education?		
	<i>(Order the options according to the importance, 1 for the most important, 6 for the least important)</i>		
	<i>Option</i>	<i>Order</i>	
<i>A</i>	Ministry of Education		
<i>B</i>	School management		
<i>C</i>	Family Members		
<i>D</i>	Society		
<i>E</i>	Women Themselves		
<i>F</i>	Nature of the job (More Time, Exerting Authority)		
5	What could be the probable barrier(s) for women to become leaders in education?		
	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>A</i>	Family responsibilities at home		
<i>B</i>	Informal male networks that females cannot break into		
<i>C</i>	Isolation of women at the administrative level		
<i>D</i>	Night work and long hours		
<i>E</i>	Stamina required to do the job		
<i>F</i>	Overt and covert discrimination against women at the time of appointment;		
<i>G</i>	Personal doubts about their own abilities		
<i>H</i>	Additional responsibilities that accompany the role		
<i>I</i>	Geographical Relocation and Mobility		
<i>J</i>	Career Breaks & Comparitively less Experience (Maternity Leaves)		
<i>K</i>	Thought to be relatively hesitant in making career plans		
<i>L</i>	Essentialist stereotypes held that women are less likely to be good leaders than men e.g. they tend to be passive and gentle while men provide a preferable style of stronger and more decisive leadership.		

6	In your opinion which of the following behave differently with women leaders than with men leaders? <i>(You can select more than one options)</i>			
	School Managment		Colleagues	
	Students		Parents	
	Ministry		Others (Specify)	
7	Do you perceive there to be a need for an increase in the number of female administrators in schools?			
	Yes	No	Cannot say	
8	What factors do you feel need to change in order to help more qualified women to become educational administrators?			
	<i>Change</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Cannot Say</i>
	Time commitment needed to be lessened			
	School boards and society need to get out of the mindset that male authority has more clout than female authority			
	Provide a widening circle of personal and professional references who can assist in the promotion of women as candidates for positions			
	The committee that is involved in hiring future administrators should be balanced by gender, race, and ethnicity			
	Eliminate the discrimination that occurs towards women who take time off to get pregnant, have children and raise them (Ease the Experience criterion for women)			
	Create policies in the work place that allow for on-site child care, flexible working hours, and parental leave so that parents can more effectively balance work and life.			
	Other Suggestions: 1.			
	2.			

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