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Teachers' Experiences of Working under the Leadership of Women Principals at Secondary Schools in Remote Pakistan: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Various studies on women's leadership in schools have been conducted in Pakistan; however, literature has been scarce on how teachers experience working under the leadership of women principals in schools. This qualitative study; therefore, has attempted to explore how teachers in schools experience working under women principals at the secondary schools in the remote region(s) in Pakistan. Twenty teachers (an equal number of men and women) participated in the study. We collected data through semi-structured interviews and analyzed those using qualitative approaches of analysis. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes. The analysis process included coding and the generation of themes based on the codes. Findings have shown that certain characteristics of women principals including motherly attitudes, supportive nature, making sense of gender issues, and being able to communicate with mothers, make the women's principals distinctive and acceptable to all the stakeholders. These findings have pertinent implications for policymaking and school leadership.

Keywords: Women Leadership, Principals, Headteachers, School Management, Teachers' Perceptions

Introduction

There is a growing concern in Pakistan that women leadership is under-represented in the schools and school systems. Though numerous studies have been conducted on women's leadership in schools, yet hardy there is no study on how teachers perceive or experience working under the leadership of women headteachers in the schools in Pakistan. Studies show that the traditional Pakistani culture has a significant impact on women acquiring and being in leadership positions (Ashraf, 2010; Rarieya, 2007). The cultural and perceptional influence is even higher in remote regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. It has been observed that some of the girls' high schools in Baltistan Regions do not have women principals to fill those positions.

There has been a scarcity of studies on perceptions of teachers regarding women principals in Baltistan Regions. However, studies on women in educational leadership have centered on the experiences of women in leadership and the fact that cultural norms are the major barrier that results in the under-representation of women in Pakistan (Shah, 2016). In such remote areas, women leadership generally face numerous issues and changes emerging from school contexts and the society where they work (Faulkner, 2015). The remoteness and rural context make the women leadership role more challenging, complex, and interwoven (Shafa, 2011). There are 6417 teachers in the region, among them 2647 and 2770 are men and women respectively; however, hardly a few women are headteachers or principals in schools. A strategy to address such concerns is to encourage and facilitate more women to take leadership positions.

School leadership is an important factor in shaping up the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of teachers and co-workers in schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997). Likewise, knowing how the teachers perceive women's leadership in schools is vital (Fuller, 2017). Thus, this study has attempted to explore teachers' points of view of women's leadership in schools in terms of women as school heads. The findings of the study are significant for the school systems, communities, policymakers, and

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school leadership.

Review of Literature

Leadership is a process of influencing the actions of people. It is generally enacted based on personal, professional, and societal values. Leadership is a process to inspire people and manage things for a purpose. The processes and styles of leadership have an impact on the staff motivation and boosting up their morale in achieving the desired goals.

Highlighting the differences between leadership and management, Early and Weindling (2004) claim that leadership is based upon vision, mission, and values; on the other hand, the management is more to do with the implementation, planning, and organizing resources for the planned activities and affairs. Likewise, Retallick and Mithani (2003) found out that in Pakistan those school principals who have management experience can practice their leadership roles effectively in schools. However, it is not proven that whether or not effective managers would become effective leaders. Nevertheless, studies have highlighted the routine administrative responsibilities of headteachers and principals in schools where they mostly focus on the day-to-day practices (Simkins, Sisum & Memon, 2003). Various studies have rejected the false perceptions that men can be better leaders as compared to women (Khan, Khan, & Iqbal, 2018; Retallick & Mithani, 2003; Ashraf, 2013).

It is a fact that women are underrepresented in education (Begum, 2006; Retallick & Mithani, 2003; Rarieya, 2007). It could be due to the lesser educational opportunities coupled with cultural taboos in society. For instance, women until the recent past did not have schooling opportunities, which resulted in lesser opportunities to work as teachers or headteachers. Likewise, the social norms and values of the society also heavily impact how men or women accumulate management abilities and leadership styles. Thus, cultural values influence the perceptions about leadership in one way or the other (Ali, 2009; Junejo, Sarwar & Ahmed, 2018; Aslam, 2014).

In a study, Asharf (2013) found that in the South Asian perspective, parents' preferred to send their daughters to the schools where there were women teachers or headteachers. She further explored that it was because the parents felt that their daughters are protected and secure in the presence of women teachers in schools. Additionally, women teachers have a comparatively better role in girl students' learning (Aslam, 2014; Ali, 2009). They play a variety of roles as school heads depending on the context where they work (Fuller, 2017).

Educational researchers have found that positive school cultures result in the high achievement of the students, improved teacher collaboration, and improved attitudes of teachers towards their profession. A principal or headteacher can play a key role to ensure a positive school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997).

To conclude, effective leadership enhances teacher motivation regardless of the gender identity of the school heads. Though there are studies on the roles, possibilities, and practices of women headteachers in schools, yet there is no literature available on the perceptions of teachers towards women principals in Gilgit-Baltistan. Therefore, it is imperative to explore how the school teachers perceive and experience working under the women headteachers or principals. This study thus has attempted to shed light on this very notion.

Research Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative descriptive approach to conduct the study (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative studies have their foundations on the bedrock of the interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data from 20 partisans (an equal number of men and women teachers). These participants had been working under women principals or headteachers in the schools. The study was conducted in the district of Gilgit-Baltistan. Through the purposive sampling technique, we selected three government schools where women headteachers or principals were working. However, to maintain the ethical considerations and anonymity of the institutions the researchers protect the real names of the institutions.

The researchers selected 20 participants based on voluntary participation from the two schools and one college which had women principals. They gave written information about the study to the teachers and received their voluntary consent as a result.

Data collection and analysis

The researchers used the semi-structured interview to collect data. They conducted one to three follow-up interviews with each of the participants. Conducting multiple interviews with the

participants enabled them to get in-depth data. The semi-structured interviews also gave them opportunities for probing. The researchers conducted interviews in Urdu, transcribed them verbatim, and translated the extracts of interviews from Urdu to English for publication purposes. They audio-recorded the interviews based on the consent of the participants.

The researchers prepared the interview data for the analysis based on certain stagger plans including listening to the audio records several times, transcribing the interviews verbatim, printing the transcripts, and developing separate files for all the participants. Once the individual files were developed, the researchers went through the transcripts and began coding the data under various themes emerging from the data (Eisner, 1998). When the individual analysis of data was complete, the researchers then conducted a cross-analysis looking for common emerging themes. This enabled them to conduct a thorough and robust analysis and to develop research memos that lead to the core themes of the findings of the study. Upon developing the first analysis, the findings were cross-checked against the relevant pieces of evidence (data), which led to further scrutiny, refining, and polishing up the findings. The researchers strictly followed up the research ethics during the fieldwork, analysis, and reporting. The researchers ensured the following key ethical considerations.

- Ensured voluntary participation based on sharing of information about the research study.
- Used pseudonyms in place of real names of the participants and their institutions.
- Strictly followed confidentiality and anonymity of the data.
- Shared the interview transcripts with the respective participants for validation.

Analysis and Findings

Findings showed that the research participants appreciated the women leadership in the schools given their certain characteristics including having motherly characters, being encouragers, being accessible, and having better communications with mothers.

Experiencing the motherly values and characters

The research participants mentioned that women headteachers showcased a motherly character, which comforted the teachers to work with them. The following are some commonly emerging extracts from the interviews:

- "When students break rules, they should ideally be expelled from the school. However, our principal looks at such issues as another. She tries to understand the reasons behind the students' behave in certain manners. It is important to know the reasons for the behaviors instead of punishing the students. This is a visionary approach." (Interview Extract).
- "Our principal is against corporal punishment. She has a sympathetic compassionate mind like that of a mother. I think, this is important because it leads to transformation and it is everlasting." (Interview Extracts).
- "At first, I had no self-confidence in her [the principal]. I thought it could be a challenging task for a woman to run such a big school! However, as she [the principal] performed her duties, it built up my confidence in her. Her polite attitude and caring nature were the driving force to motivate all the teachers and staff members including me." (Interview Extract).
- "I like the way our principal engages us and receives the opinion of us in taking decisions. Women are perfect decision-makers because their experience at home as mothers or sisters makes them good decisionmakers." (Interview Extract)
- "In the beginning, I had no confidence in a female principal. However, our principal's working style is like a mother or an elder sister to explain things to you and support your decision. I think, being a woman she has got such characteristics." (Interview Extract)

Analysis of the above extracts from the interviews showed that being a woman, the principals had certain motherly characters that enabled them to lead schools while accommodating the opinions of the co-workers and valuing their opinion in the decision-making process.

The feeling of encouraged and empowered

Another characteristic of woman principals and headteachers, perceived and experienced by the research participants (teachers), was the encouraging nature and empowering attitude of the women to headteachers and principals. The following are some common extracts from the interviews:

- "Our headteacher once asked me, what if I make a timetable for the school! I was astonished to hear that as I had not developed one before. However, I respected the trust of my headteacher and developed a timetable. I then realized that I had those competencies, yet I did

not know about them. I came to know about such expertise because of the head teacher's trust and confidence in me." (Interview Extract).

- "As a teacher, I have seen that our principal assigns duties to all of us that makes us learn and grow professionally." (Interview Extract)

- "I know that my principal offers chances of professional development while assigning duties to us. This makes us feel empowered and encouraged. I think it is because being a woman she has developed such characteristics in the family while managing things at home" (Interview Extract).

- "I have now realized that women principals develop collaboration to run the management. We work individually and in groups, and always find our principal with us." (Interview Extract)

- "Our principal works as a counselor. If something bad happens, she performs the role of a counselor and resolves the issue. As a woman, she has got such great qualities" (Interview Extract)

The above extracts from the interviews and their analysis show that women principals tend to empower the teachers in their decisions. As a result, the teachers feel empowered and encouraged. The research participants (teachers) perceived that the women headteachers play the role of counselors, elder sisters, and facilitators of good practices in the schools. The soft and polite nature of the principals, being women, has made them observe patience, understand issues and concerns, engage the co-workers in the decisions as team members, which provides a strong foundation to the woman headteachers and principals in their day to day school management.

Women teachers feeling professional comfort under the women headteachers

Most of the research participants, particularly all the women participants, mentioned that, unlike men headteachers or principals, women headteachers were accessible in the routine activities. In other words, research participants demonstrated that teachers valued the management of women principals. The following extracts from the interviews shed light on this phenomenon:

- "Working under two women principals in my career, I have seen that as a woman teacher I can easily contact the woman headteachers. I feel comfortable to interact with her, share issues with her, and receive feedback." (Interview Extract)

- "Woman headteachers are very helpful and supportive to all of us and they pay attention to our needs and issues. Being a man, I have never felt any discrimination working under the woman headteacher. I can easily go to her for seeking guidance." (Interview Extract)

- "Women principals have passions and they are supportive. They never get irritated on our small and petty mistakes. They have a forgiving attitude that enables us to have confidence and grow." (Interview Extract)

- "I have noticed that woman principals can always feel and realize the issues and problems faced by woman teachers. They can understand what we say and how we experience things in society. Thus, as a woman teacher, I always feel comfortable going to the woman principal. It gives me a comfort zone." (interview Extract)

- "It is understood that a man headteacher may not make sense of the issues that woman teachers experience in everyday life. A woman headteacher is always able to understand and make sense of how it is like working in a patriarchal society." (Interview Extract)

- "As a woman teacher, I feel easy to go to a woman headteacher, share my issues and learn from her, which otherwise would not be possible." (Interview Extract)

Based on the analysis of the interview data, it is concluded that woman headteachers or principals are easy to be approached by the teachers and seek their guidance. It was evident that woman teachers, in particular, showed comfort to have a woman headteacher or principal in the schools. They felt that in a male-dominated society, only a woman headteacher could make sense of the issues and realities faced by woman teachers.

Experiencing better interaction with parents, particularly with mothers

It surfaced from the analysis that interaction and communication with mothers were vital for better quality schooling. The participants felt that being available always at home, and taking greater responsibilities of nurturing the children, mothers were better sources to engage in the schooling of their children. Analysis showed that woman headteachers and principals were comparatively in a better position to interact with mothers and engage them in the schooling of their children. The following were some key extracts from the interviews.

- "We live in a patriarchal society where women generally remain at home. They cannot attend school functions and participate in school development. However, when the headteachers are women, they can come to the school and contribute." (Interview Extract)
- "A woman headteacher can make sense of school-home relationship. She can easily interact with mothers and invite them to schools. Our principal, is the best example in this regard." (Interview Extract)
- "Our headteacher arranges Mothers' Day quarterly in the school. All the mothers come to the school, attend the function, and know about the schooling of their children. Being a woman, the headteacher knows how to engage the women of the society and how to empower them." (Interview Extract)
- "Unlike my previous school, I have noticed that mothers would easily come to the school. They meet with us and with our headteacher. I think, it is because of the woman headteacher." (Interview Extract)
- "Being a mother, a sister, or a wife, a woman headteacher can easily understand the background of the students and the societal reality. Thus, they are in a better position to educate the parents, particularly the mothers, about the nurturing and education of their children." (Interview Extract).

It is evident from the above extracts that the research participants (teachers) perceived and experienced that women headteachers had better communication with the mothers in connection with the development of their children. In a patriarchal society and rigid cultural norms and values, woman headteachers were able to interact with the mothers. Thus, the role of woman headteachers and principals in parent education emerged as a powerful trait.

Discussion

This qualitative study identified how teachers experience their work under woman headteachers and principals. Findings showed that teachers regardless of their gender identities felt comfortable working under the woman headteachers and principals. They felt so because of certain characteristics of the woman headteachers. This study identified the following characteristics of the woman headteachers.

- Having motherly characteristics and playing the roles of a counselor.
- Empowering and encouraging the teachers and co-workers and engaging them in routine decision-making.
- Becoming accessible and easily approachable for teachers, co-workers, and students.
- Establishing better communications and interactions with mothers.

These findings have rejected the stereotypes and misconceptions that men could only be better educational leaders. Thus, it surfaced that educational leadership is about exercising leadership roles in educational institutions by men and women based on their capabilities. These findings have showcased certain characteristics of woman headteachers and principals that make them perform their due roles effectively. Likewise, findings also showed that women principals give time to students, teachers, and co-workers along with their administrative activities. Though most of their time is spent in administrative work (Sanga & Houmea 2004), yet they also manage time for the key stakeholders. What the headteachers do, seems to be nested in their earlier experience and work (Fuller, 2017). The patriarchal society and perceptions of common people about leadership roles tend to make the work of woman headteachers challenging (Rarieya, 2007). Thus, the woman headteachers and principals' role goes beyond the day-to-day administrative practices (Simkins, Sisum & Memon, 2003).

The gender identity of the women principals (Lee, Simth & Cioci, 1993) plays a key role in becoming a role model for the women teachers and giving them a comfort zone to share their personal and professional issues and concerns with them and to seek guidance and counseling accordingly. The motherly character of the women principals not only provides learning opportunities to women teachers but all the teachers and staff members including the students. Observing patience, being polite, and taking a supportive and inspirational approach by the women principals, results in the transformation of learning in the schools.

In addition, being women, they also lay strong foundations to establish connections with mothers, educating them about their children's education and involving them in the school improvement initiatives. Such initiatives are of paramount importance in remote and patriarchal societies where traditional cultural norms and values have a stronghold (Shafa, 2011).

The following recommendations surface from the findings:

1. At the strategic level, there is a need to bring about policy reforms to ensure more women taking leadership positions in schools.
2. Incentives for women headteachers and principals should be given in the remote areas so that the remote girls' schools have women headteachers and principals.
3. In addition, it is advisable to plan various in-house professional development opportunities for headteachers.
4. The Gilgit-Baltistan education ministry should develop a mechanism to appoint women headteachers and principals in the girls-only schools and in the schools where co-education is in practice. This will not only inspire the school-going girls in the remote regions but also will become instrumental to the enrolment of more girls in the schools.

Conclusion

This qualitative study has explored how teachers experience while working under the leadership of women principals in schools in a remote region in Pakistan. Twenty men and women teachers were interviewed to make sense of their experience of working under women principals. Findings showed that it was the individuals, not their gender, that matter in the school leadership. However, some traits and characteristics of women principals seem to enable them to exercise their leadership role effectively. Such traits include their motherly approach, supportive nature, being aware of the issues of the working women, and being able to communicate and educate the mothers.

Findings have put forth certain key recommendations to the policymakers and school systems about appointing women headteachers or principals in the girls-only schools and the co-education schools in the remote regions for better educational outcomes.

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