

FACTORS INFLUENCING FEMALE TEACHERS' DECISION TO BECOME SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: A STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN LAHORE, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the factors that either facilitated or hindered the female teachers to become school principals. The sample included ten female school principals from ten different schools in district Lahore, Punjab province, Pakistan. Data was collected using face to face semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data and find the major themes. The results revealed that factors like female role models, family structure, previous work experience, and passion for work were the major factors that influenced teachers' decision to become school principals. The provides insights for prospective female teachers who are aspiring to become school principals.

Keywords: Women leadership, school principals, qualitative study

1. Introduction

Women's participation in educational leadership has been steadily increasing, yet female teachers continue to face unique challenges in their pursuit of principalship. While many women aspire to leadership roles, the decision to become a school principal is influenced by a combination of motivational factors and barriers. Some female teachers are driven by a desire for personal and professional growth, the ability to make a meaningful impact on students, and the opportunity to bring positive change to their schools (Begley & Campbell-Evans, 1992; Crow & Glascock, 1995). However, others may be discouraged by systemic challenges, lack of mentorship, and social expectations that hinder their leadership aspirations (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). This complex interplay between motivators and barriers shapes the career trajectories of women in educational leadership and determines the extent to which they pursue and attain principalship positions.

Research on women in school leadership has highlighted several key motivators that encourage female teachers to step into principalship roles. Studies have shown that intrinsic motivation plays a significant role, with many aspiring female principals citing the desire to enhance their skills, broaden their knowledge, and contribute to the betterment of their schools as key driving factors (Begley & Campbell-Evans, 1992). Additionally, external motivators such as leadership training programs and mentorship opportunities can provide women with the confidence and support necessary to transition into leadership roles (Crow & Glascock, 1995). However, despite these motivators, women often face substantial obstacles that limit their advancement in educational leadership. Support-system barriers, gender biases, and a lack of mentorship opportunities contribute to the underrepresentation of women in principalship positions (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Eckman, 2004). The career trajectories of male and female educators differ significantly, with women often experiencing non-linear paths that involve additional

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responsibilities such as curriculum work and childcare, making their journey to leadership more challenging (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

This study aims to explore the factors that either facilitate or inhibit female teachers in their pursuit of principalship. By examining both motivational factors and potential barriers, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges women face in educational leadership.

The study will address the following research question:

What are the factors that facilitated or inhibited women leaders while pursuing the leadership position?

Understanding these influences can help policymakers and educational institutions develop strategies to support aspiring female principals, ensuring greater gender equity in school leadership.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it helps us understand why some female teachers want to become school principals and why some do not. It looks at the things that help them and the things that make it harder for them to get leadership positions.

By learning about these factors, schools and education leaders can find ways to support and encourage more women to become principals. This can help create more equal opportunities for both men and women in school leadership.

The study also helps future female leaders by showing them what to expect and how to overcome challenges. In the end, this research can make schools better by making sure the best people, no matter their gender, get a chance to lead.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

This study follows a qualitative approach to understand how female school leaders manage public schools successfully. Qualitative research helps explore real-life experiences that cannot be explained with numbers. According to Lewis (2015), qualitative research means gathering, organizing, and carefully analyzing information from discussions and conversations to understand social experiences naturally.

Scope of the Study This study focuses on:

1. Schools located in Lahore, Punjab.
2. Only public schools (private schools are excluded).
3. Only female leaders as participants.

The study comprised 10 female principals from the public sector secondary schools in district Lahore, Punjab province, Pakistan.

3.2 Data Collection

To understand the views of female school leaders, face-to-face interviews were conducted. Open-ended questions were used so that participants could freely share their opinions and experiences. The questions aimed to explore their thoughts on the role of head teachers. Since personal experiences are important in qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were used,

allowing follow-up questions to be asked. Conducting in-person interviews also helped build trust and observe participants' body language.

3.3 Data Analysis

After collecting the interviews, the next step was to organize the data by looking for patterns and themes (Saldana, 2009). Before writing down the interviews, I listened to the recordings multiple times to ensure no details were missed. Thematic analysis was carried out to find emerging themes. The steps are given below.

1. Reading transcripts multiple times.
2. Picking out important statements.
3. Understanding meanings behind responses.
4. Grouping similar ideas into categories.
5. Creating main themes from categories.
6. Writing a clear explanation of findings.
7. Confirming accuracy with participants.

To make sense of the responses, I kept reading and coding the transcripts. A coding system helped sort answers into meaningful themes, giving a complete picture of the findings.

Ethical Considerations Since this study involves human participants, their safety and privacy were a top priority. Approval was obtained from relevant organizations, and participants were fully informed about the study before agreeing to join (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). They received an email invitation explaining the study, and they were given time to think before deciding to participate. Before the interviews, I collected written consent forms, ensuring voluntary participation and anonymity. Participants were allowed to ask questions and were free to withdraw at any time.

Only I had access to the interview data to keep participants' information private. They were informed that their interviews would be recorded, but the recordings would be destroyed after the study was completed. There was no risk of emotional harm to the participants at any stage. To maintain fairness and accuracy, ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process.

4 Results

4.1 Female Role Models

The school heads were asked about the major factors that motivated them to become school leaders. They identified female role models as one of the contributing factors that helped them successfully reach the leadership position. The results depicted that they identified their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or mothers-in-law as their female role models. Out of all the respondents, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and mother-in-law were regarded as their female role models by six, four, three, and one respondent respectively. One participant responded that they had no female role models. Considerably two participants responded that they view their mother and aunt both as role models.

As mentioned earlier, six such respondents view their mother as a female role model for them. Several respondents said that they were motivated for being a teacher by their mothers and then applied for the post of headship after getting inspiration from their mothers. The participants were motivated by their mothers in various ways based on varying reasons.

Participant A said that:

“My mother belonged to a well-off family, but unluckily my grandfather did not allow her to get an education. Therefore, she instilled a continuous thirst to learn and get educated. It created a significant influence on my future career, as it became the goal of my life to make her proud of myself being a teacher.”

Another participant, participant C told that her mother wanted to be a teacher and a principal afterward, but she could not become the one due to the poor background of her family.

“That’s why I have the desire to fulfill her dreams by following the same path in my career which she could not follow.”

Another respondent that we named as respondent B said that:

“My female role model is my mother.”

Her mother had a significant influence on her future career as she was able to view her mother as a live example that how family and professional lives can be combined effectively.

Managing family and professional lives simultaneously can give rise to many conflicts that’s why these two sectors are considered controversial.

Some women leaders in higher secondary schools also considered their grandmothers as their role models. Two of the participants in our study stated that their grandmothers have played their part in their path to becoming school principals. Their mode of thinking and the trajectory of their careers were influenced by their grandmothers. Participant F mentioned that she had two females as role models in her family and those were her grandmothers.

“I was raised by my two grandmothers due to some of the family reasons. Due to this, my mode of thinking, thoughts as well as my internal strengths were influenced by them.”

Moreover, she stated that her career path was also influenced by her both grandmothers. Likewise, participant E accepted that she will not be a teacher if her grandmother was not a teacher as well.

Participant E mentioned that:

“I can only recall my grandmother as a female role model who worked actively along with my grandfather. She had made a great influence on me.”

Participant F who was a principal also stated that she had two female role models; she talked about the female-dominated family system according to which ‘the first word in her family was associated with her grandmothers and mother.’ 2 female respondents mentioned that their aunt was their female role model. Participant G stated that her career path was influenced by her aunts.

“I am in the 17th year of my educational field and the main reason behind my choice of becoming a teacher was that most of my aunts were also teachers. Generally, I belong to a teacher’s family.”

Participant H said her aunt; the sister of her father was a role model for her. Her aunt was the only sister of her father and they were brought up in the same way so her aunt was a strong woman who had many aspirations in her life. That’s why

“I had spent a lot of time with her when I was young. She taught me the way of perceiving different things in life, realizing the responsibility of my actions and she also

guide me on how to be self-independent in my life so that I can take the right and appropriate decisions for myself. Due to this reason, she was a mentor for me and an influencing person for me who gave me the motivation to become a teacher and to apply for the post of principal afterward."

However, the decision of applying for the post of principal was completely her own decision which was taken after an experience of 18 years in the field of education.

From the facts obtained after analysis of different views of female leaders, we can conclude that some women require female role models in their lives to become leaders and certain women who are born in a patriarchal family system get their motivation from their fathers. The families who already have a higher number of women leaders and working professionals produce a higher number of female leaders because they are inspired by the women around them.

In the next section, the relation between the influence of the patriarchal family system and lacking female role models will be discussed.

4.2 Family Structure

While asking for the factors that influence the decisions of the women teachers to apply for the post of principal, we found out that family structure was also a major factor that greatly influenced their decision to become women school leaders. Four themes were identified as a result of data analysis done by the researcher:

- a) Patriarchal family system.
- b) Matriarchal family system.
- c) Both patriarchal and matriarchal family systems.
- d) Neither patriarchal nor matriarchal family system.

As mentioned earlier, the patriarchal family system was experienced by 3 women participants. It has been analyzed from the available data that their decisions of becoming a teacher and then applying for the post of a principal were significantly influenced by the patriarchal family system experienced by them. Participant H specified that she had a strong influence on the male-dominated family system by stating that:

"I was being motivated by my aunt to become a teacher, but on the other hand, my father wanted me to be a housewife and up-bring the children only. Finally, I decided to choose both the options and it was not an easy decision for me because my father was not persuaded that I would be able to manage my professional and personal life simultaneously in an effective manner."

The respect she got in her career of being a principal, she stated that it had no relation with the patriarchal family system and this decision was taken after gaining experience of working in the field of the educational field for many years.

"Although it was difficult for me to manage the domestic life and professional career at the same time, I did it and I am fully satisfied with all."

Respondent H was also influenced by this family system.

"A teacher was a role model for every person at that time. Everyone respected the teacher without any gender discrimination."

Three such female principals shared their experience regarding the matriarchal family system rather than the patriarchal one. Participant F said that;

"I have not experienced the patriarchal family system because two of my grandmothers brought me up. That's why my family was rather female-dominated because most of the decisions at our home were taken by my both grandmothers."

Participant J belonged to the age group of 45-54 and had professional experience of 20 years. She stated that most of the women of her generation were determined to become teachers, and men were determined to be either engineers or doctors.

"My beliefs and point of views varied from that of the people of big cities and it might be because of my association with a rural area of Pakistan."

Participant B stated that she decided to apply for the leadership post based on her previous experience in the field of education during which she also developed herself professionally as well. She was also influenced by the matriarchal family system.

"My mother had a positive outlook regarding the learning process that's why she motivated me for becoming a school teacher. She always advised me to stay confident because the Pakistani society is sometimes difficult to handle."

She had faced the stereotypical behaviors of this society from a young age and she did not want her daughter to face such issues in her life. So her mother stressed the importance of learning and getting an education because these are the priceless values of life.

"The viewpoints of my mother did not influence my decision to apply for the post of leadership but I decided to apply for this position based on my experience in the field of education."

According to the data obtained after taking the interviews of all the participants, it was deduced that 3 such female school principals had experienced both patriarchal and matriarchal family systems at some points in their life. Participant D illustrated that:

"In those days, even most of the families followed the patriarchal family model, but my family was different from them. It could be a male-dominated family, but my mother was well-educated and she had the responsibility of other things as well along with upbringing the children. My mother and father both had a good say at home. I decided to become a teacher on my own although my parents guided me towards this career path."

Participant D shared her thought that her decision of becoming a teacher was not related to her family system which followed both the family systems. She did not have any female as a role model but she had the aspiration of becoming a teacher since her childhood days. After gaining experience and being confident, she decided to apply for the position of leader after many years. In regards to this, Participant C said that her decision of being a teacher or a principal was not influenced by her family system as she had experienced both of the family systems. Even though her family including her mother supported her and after her marriage, her husband was a source of encouragement for her, she stated that:

"During my childhood, most of the families followed the patriarchal family system. Both of my parents had the responsibility of deciding all the matters at home. Although my father tried to have the lead at home my decision of being a teacher was not based on it. I took my decision entirely based on the ongoing trends of that time as every person wished to become a teacher or a doctor at that time."

She explained that she applied for the position of leader after having experienced many years in the field of education.

Two of our participants responded that their decisions of becoming a teacher and then a school principal were neither influenced by the patriarchal nor by the matriarchal family system. They decided about their career paths according to their own choices.

Participant G explained that although she belonged to a patriarchal family like other Pakistani families of that time her career decisions were not influenced by it.

“My way of thinking and perceiving different things in my life influenced my decision of becoming a teacher. It might be because of the reason that I liked the profession of teaching, and teaching in a primary school was my admiration because of which I decided to be a teacher.”

She had her own experience in the field of education due to which she got motivated to decide to apply for the post of principal. Participant J shared her point of view that the decisions of older generations were more influenced by the male-dominated family systems.

“The way of living was different in those days as compared to the present days and things will get changed and the stereotypical behaviors will get eliminated over time.”

Participant E was neither motivated by a patriarchal nor by the matriarchal family system to apply for the post of principal, but she was motivated by her grandmother, colleagues, and friends.

“There were most of the women in my school and I felt lucky to work with them. We were as mentors for each other and this thing gave me more confidence for applying at the leadership post.”

She also mentioned that she decided to be a school principal after having 19 years of experience in the field of education along with being passionate about her profession.

“I always aimed to bring some significant changes to our educational system.”

4.3 Personal factors

4.3.1 Family and friends

Family and friends are some of those facilitators which are mentioned frequently. Almost all of the 10 female principals who participated in this study mentioned their families and friends as their facilitators who helped them to make progress in their careers. Participant B strongly believed that if a woman wants to deal effectively with the issues arising at the workplace, she should have a supporting family. Her family was her facilitator and supported her to make progress in her career.

“Nowadays, it seems that this Pakistani society does not want that a woman should get facilitated so that she could apply for the post of a leader. Especially, the sensitive and emotional candidates are a matter of concern because they could not deal with the clashes and other problems arising at their workplaces.”

Participant A also mentioned that

“It is true that there can be many reasons due to which a teacher may change her career path, or might continue to follow the same path already being followed by her unless she becomes successful. As far as my experience is concerned, I can say that my career progression was facilitated by my family.”

Moreover, she said that the role of a family is very important, their role may not be decisive but they can play their part in the way of perceiving various situations or on the actions of people and how they tackle those situations.

Some other participants also mentioned their families as a support for them.

“There were several times during my career when I had to make difficult decisions which could either lead to good or bad outcomes, but my family was always there to provide support to me.”

It was mentioned by 2 female principals that their career accession was facilitated by their friends. Participant D elicited that her friends supported her at every step of her career and were always there for her,

“There were such teachers and even principals with whom we could exchange our ideas regarding the ways how to lead the schools, strategic ideas, and how to solve the issues that arise in schools on daily basis. We were mentored each other for a long time because mentoring is one of the main things that lacks in the Pakistani educational system.”

Another participant also mentioned her friends as her continuous support who were always there for her in every step of her career path, the things become much easier even after having a conversation with them via phone call. Participant I said that her friends helped her regarding the schooling of her children.

“I had to deal with the issue of picking up my children from school. My friends helped me in this regard, they picked up my children from school whenever I was busy with some work at school.”

4.3.2 Previous educational experience

In this study, 6 female principals mentioned their previous education experience as a facilitator regarding their career progression. One of the participants said that her progress in her career was facilitated by her experience in the previous field of education. Two more participants agreed to the fact that the experience of education helped them in their careers. Participant G said that

“When I decided against applying for the post of a principal, I had no experience of this field at that time. Due to this reason, I was more self-determined and driven to enhance my knowledge and gain more experience by practically working in this field.”

Participant E said that

“The experience in my previous educational field was a crucial facilitating factor. I am completely in the support of decree that you should have experience of 15 years in the educational field to apply for the post of a teacher or a principal. Because it is the only way by which a teacher would be able to pass through every stage of the hierarchical structure before reaching the top position. Only then you can say that you are experienced enough.”

The experience in the past field of education can also be associated with the decent relationship with other colleagues and staff members of the school. Participant J supported this viewpoint by stating that her career accession was influenced by her experience in the previous field of education.

"I consider that the experience in the previous educational field is of considerable importance which makes us able to perceive the things from a different perception about them. Practice is required to become perfect."

4.3.3 Passion for work

Three female participants mentioned passion for work as a facilitator for their progress. Participant E mentioned that:

"Her passion for doing something determines the success of her in the career. If you do not love your work and are not passionate about it then it will become difficult for you to wake up early every morning for going to school."

She further said that

"My passion for work is above all other factors." Another respondent said that 'One of the important facilitating factors for any of the school principal is her passion about her work.'

Participant I said that:

"It is true that some people are born to be teachers. Teaching is a part of their genes. We all have that side of nurturing. All it needs is to associate with some of the good teaching skills."

5 Discussion

We found out that teachers were motivated and took inspiration from their mothers to apply for the post of principal. Some respondents' mothers belonged to rich families and they were strong and professional working women so as mothers they inspired their daughters as well to seek progress in their teaching career. Another major finding is that most of the mothers suffered a lot during their early days as teachers and it was not easy for them to become school leaders or leaders in higher education because their families as well as Pakistani was not supportive for women to aspire for principalship or any other leading positions. This is similar to the study of Coleman (2003) according to which women have to take care of families and other domestic responsibilities, so their applying for leading positions is discouraged in developing countries' societies. Because of these reasons, the mothers of our respondents supported their daughters to become leaders without major hurdles.

Some participants were inspired by their mothers because their mothers wanted to become teachers or principals however because of the orthodox mindset of the Pakistani society, as evident from Coleman (2003), they couldn't achieve their dreams. But now they wanted to fulfill their dreams through their daughters and motivated them to become what they could not. This helped our respondents in overcoming the hurdles in their path to becoming school leaders.

The second category of female role models that we found in our research is grandmothers. After analysis, we found out that two of our participants considered their grandmothers as their female role models. Some other participants also considered their aunts as role models for them. This finding was quite surprising for us as it has not been very visible in the past literature. Our results are similar to the study of Karamanidou (2017). She conducted a study that focused on the barriers faced by women principals in Cypriot schools. Our findings

aligned with her findings regarding the factors that affect the transition process of women teachers to the position of principal.

We also found out that the nature of Pakistani society gives greater importance and respect to the teachers and school principals so the level of respect motivated the participants to apply for the position. In a society where women as leaders are not considered suitable and favorable for society, the position of principal came with greater respect in this regard. These facts are proved by Karamanidou's (2017) study as well as she stated that the societies of developing countries do not provide any support or favorable working environment for professional women rather, they oppose their professionalism.

After the influence of female role models in the decisions of women to become school principals, the second major influencing factor is the structure of the family. The different types of family structures observable in Pakistan are the patriarchal family system, matriarchal family system, system with an amalgamation of patriarchal and matriarchal values, and finally a family system with neither of these systems being dominant in Pakistan. Even though Pakistani society is considered essentially dominated by patriarchal values, not many of our respondents stated that they were influenced by the patriarchal family model. This is surprising that only 30% of our respondents were influenced by the patriarchal family system and the influence was not negative for all the participants. A participant was positively influenced by this system as her father motivated her to be a principal. There are many studies that highlight the relationship between women's educational leadership and the family system. The study conducted by Hertz-Lazarowitz and Shapira (2005) explains the limiting conditions and stressed environment of women living in a male-dominated society.

We also found out that some women's families were dominated by females and they had the first word in the families. These participants were influenced by their mothers, grandmothers, and their aunts to pursue their careers as a teacher and then seek the position of school principal. It was revealed to us that even though many participants were not part of the patriarchal family system but they were still indirectly influenced by patriarchy. Even when their families were dominated by females their career was influenced by patriarchal society.

According to the interview data obtained from our participants, the major factor that influenced our participants' decisions to become school leaders as personal factors. These personal factors are further divided into sub-themes as family and friends, previous educational experience, and passion for work. Keeping in view the context of Pakistani society, our results are quite surprising as almost all of our participants stated that their family and friend were the major facilitators for them during their journey to become school principals. All of them acted as major support systems during any sort of crisis situation and kept motivating them to pursue the path of leadership. Our participants further stated that their families played a key role in their career development. In Pakistani society where women are mostly discouraged to become leaders because there is a perception that women are incapable and less competent compared to men, supporting and facilitating family and friends are necessary for a woman to achieve promotion in her career. Especially those

women who are sensitive and emotional need someone to support them during times of crisis.

The fourth major factor that influenced women principals while pursuing leadership positions in the school is a previous educational experience. In the present study, 6 principals mentioned their previous educational experience as a facilitating factor towards their career transition. One of the participants stated that *“the experience in my previous educational field was a crucial facilitating factor”*. Furthermore, past experience in the field of education can also be important for the development of smooth relationships with our colleagues and other staff members. As stated in Karamanidou’s (2017) study, past experience helps the teachers in the development of relations with staff members and influences the career progression of the female leaders. The majority of the respondents in Karamanidou’s (2017) study stated that the previous educational experience was a facilitating factor in achieving the position of principal of the school. The present study also revealed similar results from the data collected.

The last factor that influenced our participants during their path to becoming the principal was the passion they had for working as a teacher and then becoming a principal because when you become a leader of the school you have the opportunity to bring a positive change in the education system. In the present research, three participants stated that passion for teaching as a career as a facilitator for and helped them transcend through the ranks. The data obtained from our interviews suggest that when women have passion and love their work then it motivates them to do more. If teachers lack passion, then it might be difficult for them to progress through their careers. These results are to the results obtained in Karamanidou’s (2017) study.

6 Conclusion

This study highlights the key factors that influence female teachers in Pakistan to pursue school leadership positions. The findings reveal that family support, particularly from mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, plays a crucial role in motivating women to become principals. Many participants were inspired by their mothers' struggles and dreams, while others were encouraged by female relatives who served as role models. Additionally, the study shows that family structure, whether patriarchal or matriarchal, influences career decisions, but support from family and friends remains a significant facilitator. Furthermore, previous educational experience and a passion for teaching were found to be strong motivating factors in career progression. These findings align with existing research, such as Karamanidou (2017), Coleman (2003, 2004), and Hertz-Lazarowitz and Shapira (2005), which highlight societal and structural challenges faced by women in leadership. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the need for greater support and encouragement for women seeking leadership roles in education, as their success can lead to more inclusive and progressive school environments.

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