

Women Leaders in Education: Insights from Success Stories

Dr. Shehzad Ahmed^{1*}, Dr. Muhammad Tahir Khan Farooqi², Aima Shafique³, Salma Waheed⁴

^{1*}Assistant Prof. (Education) University of Okara

²Associate Prof. (Education) University of Okara

³PhD Scholar University of Okara

⁴PhD Scholar University of Okara

Abstract:

The study, Women Leaders in Education: Insights from Success Stories, explored the transformative role of women in educational leadership. Using qualitative research, the study analyzed the narratives of 18 female participants that explained their approaches to leadership, characterized by cooperation, inclusivity and resilience. The female leaders shared their challenges, including societal barriers and expectations and the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers. Using thematic analysis six themes were generated such as passionate dedication, self-assurance, value-based actions, collaboration, trust and clarity of purpose. These themes showcased the multi-faceted nature of their leadership styles. The article explored the critical contributions of female educational leaders in fostering equity and excellence in education. This study aims to inspire current and aspiring women leaders and encourage them to pursue and excel in academic leadership roles.

Key words: Women, Leadership, Education, Success Stories

Introduction

Leadership is a multifaceted phenomenon that demands a diverse set of skills, emotional intelligence, and strategic thinking regardless of whether it is exercised by men or women (Freedman, 2012; Knights & Richards, 2003; Nazemi 2012). However, pat to leadership is often more challenging for women, given the historical, social, and cultural barriers they face worldwide. Despite the international community's commitment to gender equality, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly within education institutions (Blackmore, 2013; Rue & Byars, 2005). This imbalance is indicative of deeply rooted systemic issues that continue to marginalize women in professional spheres, despite their growing participation in academia and leadership pipelines.

The historical involvement of women in educational leadership can e tracked back to the 19th century, particularly in the United States, where their roles were only restricted to administrative positions within women's institutions (Thelin, 2009). This trend is reflected worldwide as women encounter significant challenges in rising to the leadership positions across Europe, Africa and Asia (UNESCO, 2012). In many developing nations, including Pakistan, these challenges are intensified by cultural limitations, traditional societal expectations, and restricted access to essential resources like education and opportunities for professional growth. Additional challenges, such as expectations about veil, movement restrictions and stringent requirements for modesty, further complicate the pursuit of leadership roles for women in environment predominantly led by men. (Rehman, Chandio, Hussain, & Jingdong, 2019; Harris, 2008)

In Pakistan, the dynamics are influenced by a public education system that is divided by gender, where roles like school directors are commonly assigned based on factors such as seniority, academic credentials, and performance in teaching (Hurley, Chaudhary 2016). Although these standards may seem impartial at first glance, they often put women at a disadvantage due to the historically unequal opportunities they have had in both education and professional connections. Women who achieve leadership roles often face opposition not only from their male colleagues but also from long- standing societal beliefs that undermine their authority and leadership skills. This resistance is particularly evident in areas where traditional patriarchal values prevail.

Globally, women's contributions to education have been significant and transformative. Over the past two decades, more women have entered academia as teachers, researchers, and administrators. Despite this progress, a persistent gender gap remains in senior leadership roles, particularly in higher education. Women often earn advanced degrees at rates comparable to or exceeding their male counterparts, yet they continue to be underrepresented in top administrative positions (Cook, 2012; Gallant, 2014). This disparity highlights the structural and cultural barriers that continue to marginalize women leaders, even as their qualifications and contributions to the academic sector grow. An example of this issue is that globally, fewer than one in three leadership roles at universities for comprehensive reforms to rectify this disparity (Gallant, 2014).

Women encounter a variety of obstacles in their pursuit of leadership roles within education, which include social, cultural and institutional challenges in Pakistan. Many women find it difficult to reconcile their career goals with societal norms that often emphasize traditional domestic responsibilities. Additionally, the absence of specific policies and initiatives designed the support of women in leadership positions intensifies this inequality. While the national educational frameworks, such as National Policies from 1998 to 2010 along with those issued in 2009 and 2017, highlight the significance of training in

leadership and professional growth, they often overlook the distinct issues and requirements of women. This gap in attention contributes to a leadership landscape that continues to be largely male-dominated.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the personal experiences of women who hold leadership positions in education, highlighting their paths, obstacles, and achievements. By examining their narratives, especially approaches they have taken to manage intricate social, cultural, and professional environments. Gaining these insights is essential for grasping the wider effects of gender dynamics and leadership within educational settings, as well as for shaping policies that encourage fairness and inclusivity. In the end, empowering women in roles of educational leadership is not merely about justice; it is essential for driving innovation, embracing diversity, and achieving excellence in educational systems around the globe.

Literature review:

Leadership; Educational Leadership in Pakistan: Navigating Cultural and Institutional Barriers:

Leadership, influenced by cultural, linguistic, and societal norms, is a concept evolved over centuries. Leadership in past was often defined using authority, control and goal orientation that excluded women. This traditional definition persisted through ages making leadership a male dominated quality. Even today women's contribution in leadership are not fully accounted, instead focusing on traits like authority and vision overlooking collaborative aspects. The historical exclusion highlights the need to reshape the concept of leadership to foster greater inclusivity, especially within educational settings. Comparably, the concept of education in Pakistan refers to self-education. In Pakistani society, connections are valued more than results, and this is achieved through a communal approach (Begum & Mujtaba, 2016). People who engage in such activities tend to prioritize building strong relationships above having candid conversations and to follow the leader's decisions. Many Pakistani public schools still adhere to the conventional definition of leadership, despite a recent trend in the country toward educational reform in school leadership (Rizvi, 2008). Women in Pakistani culture exhibiting leadership roles face different challenges that includes cultural and societal skepticism about their capabilities. Despite these hurdles, women leaders in Pakistan's education system have demonstrated resilience and adaptability.

Women Leadership and Challenges:

Despite making up half of the human population, women have sadly not received equal recognition in many areas, including leadership. Without a doubt, women are capable of competing, understanding how to exercise leadership, and knowing how to voice their opinions, according to Harris (2005). However, women face several challenges in leadership roles across all cultures and domains. Many topics that supported women's leadership characteristics were covered in various newspapers and publications, according to Sharpe (2000). According to the majority of journalists, women are increasingly gaining roles in management. Women in educational leadership in Pakistan encounter several obstacles in their professional journey, among them being the low percentage of female leaders in the field. An excessive number of studies are included in the literature review, including studies conducted in the Asian (Irum, Abbasi, & Abbasi, 2022) and US contexts that examine the reality that some administrative problems contribute to the belittled of women in leadership and management positions in education. Research has linked the challenges that women educational leaders confront to their underrepresentation in some components that are related to particular contexts or levels, such as family obligations and concerns as well as structural and social factors like recruitment and gender (Masabo, 2015) in general, gender bias, organizational structure, culture, structural factors, and family-related issues disrupt women leaders' abilities to achieve leadership roles and to remain in education and other fields.

Lessons from Women Leaders: Success Stories:

Even with these obstacles, women in the field of education have shown extraordinary strength and the ability to adjust. In positions of leadership, they utilized creative approaches to navigate challenges and foster meaningful transformation in their organizations. The stories of their accomplishments offer important lessons regarding the traits and methods that facilitate successful leadership despite difficulties. These accounts not only celebrate the accomplishments of female leaders but also underscore the necessity of cultivating inclusive spaces that encourage and develop a variety of leadership approaches.

Statement of the Problem:

Despite the persistent gender gap in leadership positions, women educational leaders have made remarkable strides in shaping the future of education. Their success stories serve as a testament to their resilience, determination, and passion for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments. However, women educational leaders continue to face challenges like cultural, societal and structural barriers that hurdled their path and success in leadership roles.

This article aimed to highlight the success stories of women leaders in educational setting, investigating the strategies they used for coping with the challenges. By exploring their experiences, this article aimed to inspire and motivate future leaders, impact policies and appreciate a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in educational leadership.

Objectives:

1. To analyze the success stories of women in leadership roles at various educational institutions.
2. To explore the strategies employed by women leaders to overcome challenges and barriers in school leadership.

Research Questions:

1. What is the role of successful stories of women leadership in educational institutions?
2. What are the strategies employed by women leaders to overcome the challenges and barriers in school leadership?

Research Design:

The research method for this study was qualitative in nature. This research sought to characterize, comprehend, and analyze the narratives shared by female participants highlighting their leadership styles and strategies they used to navigate challenges and achieve success. The goal of this qualitative study was to better understand the leadership-guiding tactics utilized by successful female principals. The researcher analyzed the interviews of sample participant creating meaning based on the information they provided.

Through narrative analysis the study aimed to comprehend and analyze the real-world experiences of female administrators in public schools, a qualitative approach is most suitable. It is most suited to perform a qualitative study because the main objective of a study of this kind is to discover and interpret these meanings, and the purpose of this study is to ascertain how women principals make sense of their lives and their worlds.

Population:

Population of the study were female educational leaders including head teachers, principal, Dy. District Education officers (DDEO) and Assistant Education officers (AEO) working in District Okara.

Sample and sampling:

Using convenient sampling technique, researcher selected following women educational leaders for this study.

Sr. No.	Name of Participant	Designation
01	P1	Principal
02	P2	Principal
03	P3	AEO
04	P4	Principal
05	P5	Principal
06	P6	Head Teacher
07	P7	Head Teacher
08	P8	Principal
09	P9	Principal
10	P10	DDEO
11	P11	Principal
12	P12	Principal
13	P13	Principal
14	P14	Principal
15	P15	Principal
16	P16	AEO
17	P17	AEO
18	P18	Principal

Research Instrument:

Participants in the study provided the subject-specific data. In order to obtain data, the targeted population's teachers were surveyed using the sample interview procedure. After obtaining approval via email from the developer, the interview process was implemented. In the instrument, there were ten questions.

Validation and reliability of the Instrument:

The study exhibited validity as the descriptions of the phenomenon and the interviewees' responses were same. By following best practices for the procedure, such as streamlining circumstances as a researcher, the researcher attempted to ensure validity and reliability in this study. The validity of the data collected is contingent upon the dependability of the time and report between the researcher and the participants.

Data Collection Procedure:

A semi-structured interview was developed and used by the researcher as research tool. Ten questions made up the instrument, and each participant had to answer them. These behavioral questions were designed especially to find the elements—in the words of the female principal—that, in their opinion, contribute to their effectiveness as a leader. To make sure the tool was legitimate and could elicit the appropriate replies, the researcher tested it on a colleague, a female principal and fellow researcher, before using it to interview the participants.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis and the most suited for this particular research topic. In order to identify anything and everything of interest or relevance to answering the research question, within the entire data set a complete coding approach was used by the researcher. The interview transcripts were carefully examined to seek for patterns. Using important words, sentences, and phrases from the transcripts, the researcher first identified text fragments. The original theme set was created by the researcher's subsequent grouping of related text fragments into groups and giving names to each category. All of the text fragments for each topic were compiled into distinct Microsoft Word documents after the researcher had generated

the original theme set. To comprehend the connections between the themes, the final step of the study was to make a mind map. The following themes were generated:

Theme 1: Passionate dedication:

Passionate dedication is the heartbeat of achievement, where enthusiasm meets relentless effort. It's the unwavering commitment to a cause or goal that transcends mere obligation, turning challenges into invigorating opportunities. The participant underlined the value of attending a varied school. They had done their jobs in an extremely diverse and rich cultures. Each of the female participant had a strong and convincing motivation for accomplishing the tasks. They endured in the face of challenges because, at their core, they were really devoted to realizing their vision and goals for the schools. The female participants exhibited a strong sense of dedication to their convictions and a firm awareness that the job they perform mattered. This illustrated their passion to overcome barriers.

Theme 2: Self-Assurance

The second trait that emerged among women leaders was self- assurance. This self-belief, grounded in a clear sense of purpose and capability, enabled women leaders to guide their teams with clarity and resilience. Their unwavering confidence becomes a beacon, motivating those around them to embrace their potential and achieve greatness together. All the female participants who were questioned had a deep regard and admiration for the administrative duty, while also acknowledging the difficulties that come with holding such a crucial position. Specifically speaking, three out of the five women discussed their confidence affected how they present themselves as middle school administrators. The interviewees all emphasized the importance of having a strong sense of what motivates them to work, which is the foundation of self-assurance and confidence.

Theme 3: Actions Grounded in Values

When individuals act in alignment with their values, their actions resonate with authenticity and integrity, building trust and respect. The participants who were questioned expressed a strong commitment of leading while ensuring fairness, equity and well-being of students and staff. Their leadership style was shaped by acting in alignment with their values that fostered trust and respect within their communities. This demonstrated how a leader may influence employee culture by using a values-based approach to leadership. It also highlighted how values-based leadership guided women to cope with the challenges and create environments that prioritize equity, fairness and inclusion.

Theme 4: Leadership as Collaborative Effort

True leaders inspire collective effort, recognizing that the strength of a team lies in its diversity of skills and perspectives. They foster trust, encourage open dialogue, and empower every individual to contribute their best. In this collaborative space, leadership becomes a shared journey towards a common vision, where success is not the triumph of one, but the victory of all. The principals of all the schools agreed that building relationships and working together are essential for developing successful leaders. All parties involved, including parents, community members, educators, staff, and kids, were included in this mindset, and a leader repeatedly emphasized, "We're in it together!" It illustrated how women leaders in educational setting view collaboration as a crucial aspect of leadership, driving collective success.

Theme 5: Trust and Communication

Trust and open communication were identified as crucial pillars of leadership. The participants emphasized that building trust and collaboration hinges on personal connections and open communication. Trust is built through genuine relationships based on honesty and openness, crucial for effective teamwork and relationships. All participants stressed that Clear communication and trust fostered a supportive and orderly environment that enhanced team morale, and improve student outcomes by guiding and refining staff practices. It demonstrated how trust and communication enabled women leaders to build strong, cohesive teams that achieved benchmarks under their guidance.

Theme 6: Clarity of Purpose

When the destination is clearly defined and understood, every action and decision become aligned with this overarching vision. All women leaders agreed that this focus has not only eliminated distractions but also fueled motivation and resilience, as everyone knew why they were striving and what they were striving for. In both personal aspirations and organizational missions, clarity of purpose transformed effort into progress and dreams into reality. Hence the importance of having clear vision cannot be denied as its empowered women leaders to align their actions with the goals and drive meaningful outcomes.

Key findings and conclusion:

Studies showed that individuals who were deeply passionate about their work were more likely to achieve higher levels of performance and satisfaction. Research indicated that self-confident individuals were more likely to take initiative and make bold decisions. Self-assurance was linked to a positive self-image and the ability to cope with challenges and failures. It was found that when leaders and employees acted in alignment with core values, it fostered a culture of trust and ethical behavior. It was revealed that when leaders clearly articulated a vision and purpose, it created a sense of direction and meaning for the team. Study revealed that trust enhances cooperation, reduces conflicts, and improves problem-solving capabilities. It was found that leadership as a collaborative effort maximized the strengths and contributions of the entire team. The capacity to work hard and concentrate on objectives and results was also crucial; all of the participants mentioned that success required a great deal of hard effort. It was concluded that most of the principals always ensured that their staff get recognition and rewards when they achieve difficult or complex goals. A significant number of participants talked about having a supportive

family was essential in helping them maintain their work/life balance. Each respondent said that strong beliefs and ideals, such as caring for people and wanting to make a difference, served as the foundation for their leadership style. Due to the lack of specialized research on female principals, which was the study's primary research question, the study's conclusions filled this knowledge vacuum and gave female principals the tools they needed to lead effectively, as stated by other female leaders.

References:

1. Begum, R., & Mujtaba, B. G. (2016). Task and relationship orientation of Pakistani managers and working professionals: The interaction effect of demographics in a collective culture. *Public Organization Review*, 16, 199-215.
2. Blackmore, J. (2013). A feminist critical perspective on educational leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 16(2), 139-154.
3. Byars, L. L., & Rue, L. W. (2005). *Human Resource. Management*.
4. Cook, M. V. (2012). *Flight dynamics principles: a linear systems approach to aircraft stability and control*. Butterworth-Heinemann.
5. Freedman, J. (2001). *Feminism* Buckingham: Open University
6. Gallant, A. (2014). Symbolic interactions and the development of women leaders in higher education. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 21(3), 203-216.
7. Harris, A. (2005). Teacher leadership: More than just a feel-good factor?. *Leadership and policy in schools*, 4(3), 201-219.
8. Harris, A. (2008). Distributed leadership: According to the evidence. *Journal of educational administration*, 46(2), 172-188.
9. Hurley, D., & Choudhary, A. (2016). Factors influencing attainment of CEO position for women. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 31(4), 250-265.
10. Iqbal, A., Ali, M. S., Abbas, F., Shah, M. A. H., & Anjum, S. (2020). A study of work-family conflict among elementary school teachers. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 14(10), 198-209.
11. Iqbal, M. Z., Arif, M. I., & Abbas, F. (2011). HRM practices in public and private universities of Pakistan: A comparative study. *International Education Studies*, 4(4), 215-222.
12. Irum, N., Abbasi, M. S., & Abbasi, H. (2022). Study on the Challenges faced by Women Working Educational Managers. *SJESR*, 5(3), 99-107.
13. Knights, D., & Richards, W. (2003). Sex discrimination in UK academia. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 10(2), 213-238.
14. Masabo, C. M. V. (2015). *Womens empowerment through cooperatives-a study from womens perspectives*. Masters. Copenhagen Business School.
15. Nazemi, S. Z. (2012). A new class of monotone mappings and a new class of variational inclusions in Banach spaces. *Journal of Optimization Theory and Applications*, 155, 785-795.
16. Rehman, A., Chandio, A. A., Hussain, I., & Jingdong, L. (2019). Fertilizer consumption, water availability and credit distribution: Major factors affecting agricultural productivity in Pakistan. *Journal of the Saudi Society of Agricultural Sciences*, 18(3), 269-274.
17. Rizvi, F. (2008). Epistemic virtues and cosmopolitan learning:[Radford Lecture, Adelaide, Australia 27 November 2006.]. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 35(1), 17-35.
18. Shahid, H., Chaudhry, S. A., Abbas, F., Ghulam Hassan, S., & Aslam, S. (2023). Do morality-based individual differences and relational climates matter? Ethical leadership and knowledge hiding: a multilevel framework. *SAGE Open*, 13(4), 21582440231215569.
19. Sharpe, K. (2000). *Remapping early modern England: the culture of seventeenth-century politics*. Cambridge University Press.
20. Tarar, I. A., Khan Rana, A. M., & Abbas, F. (2021). Right to Education: Comparative Study of Constitutional Contours, Legislative Initiatives and Institutional Arrangements in India and Pakistan. *Elementary Education Online*, 19 (3), 3365-3371
21. Thelin, A. (2009). *Den tredje åldern: en kunskapsöversikt*. IVOSA.