Women Leadership in Bhutanese Schools

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Abstract

This paper looks at the lives of women leaders in Bhutanese schools at a time when male dominates many spheres of society such as in governance, management and education. The number of women in leadership positions, especially in schools has not improved much over the years. Even for the few in leadership positions, there are various challenges due to inherent gender biases, cultural practices and societal norms. Many of these challenges are attributed to women's traditional role in family such as raising children, balancing household work and career. Considering these issues and preconceived biases, taking up leadership roles in a male dominated society is a challenge to women leaders in schools.

This study was carried out qualitatively with roots in phenomenology in which participants' experiences were studied to get in-depth understanding of women leadership in Bhutanese schools. A total of 20 respondents were interviewed to find out perspectives and experiences of women principals and vice principals to highlight their unique strengths, contributions and inherent barriers in taking up leadership roles in schools. Four broad themes emerged including perspectives on women leadership status in Bhutanese schools, women leadership style as compared to men's leadership, barriers to women leadership in schools, and support mechanisms for women leadership at different levels.

In line with the key findings, several recommendations have been made for creating an equitable and just society, the most notable being a call to relook into plans and policies related to the transfer of women leaders in Bhutanese schools. The recommendations suggested are based on the principles of gender equality and empowerment of women in playing important roles in an evolving society. [4]

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Context of the problem

Modern education started in Bhutan with the launch of the first five-year plan in the early 1960s with borrowed curriculum and teachers from India (Zangmo, de Onis, & Dorji, 2012). The management of the schools was entrusted to them as Bhutanese were not qualified enough to manage schools yet. It was only in 1988, that the Ministry of Education (MoE) started appointing nationals as school head teachers (Dukpa, 2013). With the increasing number of schools in the last decade, the appointment of principals and their roles in schools have become greater. In spite of the progress, only 0.2 percent of school leaders are women (MoE, 2019). According to the Annual Education Statistics (MoE, 2019) women leadership in Bhutanese education system is represented by only ten women school principals compared to more than 400 male principals. Factors that inhibit women from aspiring for leadership positions in education needed to be identified and understood for women to be represented in all walks of lives to make greater contribution to nation building.

Therefore, this research intends to find out the challenges associated with poor representation of women in education leadership roles and to highlight the practical challenges related to policies, practices and attitudes associated with women leadership in schools. For this the researcher sought to answer to the following questions:

  i.   What is the status of women leadership in the schools in Bhutan?
 ii.   What are some of the factors that impede women to pursue leadership roles?
iii.   What are some of the advantages of women leadership in schools?
 iv.   How do we support women in acquiring adequate knowledge and skills to take up leadership roles in the school?

Literature Review

With the increasing number of schools in the last decade, the roles of the principals in the schools have become greater. There are around 476 schools all over the country with 8824 teachers and approximately 470 principals leading the schools (MoE, 2019). However, there are only ten female principals in the schools though women teachers comprise 41 percent of the total number of teachers.

Hudson and Rea (1996) state that the most common reason for underrepresentation of women in school administration in United States is because of negative perceptions of the way women lead. Furthermore, they point out that there is a distinct difference in the way women and men manage schools. Men are authoritative, decisive, controlling, and unemotional and traditionally these attributes are given more respect. Such an outlook to women leadership may no longer be true as gender roles in many aspects of society have changed dramatically over time, and attributes of women such as emotional and social competencies are recognized as important leadership competencies.

Eagly and Carli (2007) point out that female leaders, in general are slightly more transformational than male leaders, especially when it comes to providing support and encouragement to subordinates. They believe that women also engage more in rewarding and supportive behaviours, whereas men exceeded women in the aspects of transactional leadership involving corrective and disciplinary actions. This finding is further supported by Eagly, Johannesen and Van Engen (2003) that the only demonstrated difference between female and male managers is that women adopt a somewhat more democratic or participative style and a less autocratic or directive style than men do. As per Growe and Montgomery (1999) in United States of America, good school administration is more attuned to feminine than masculine modes of leadership behaviour. Female attributes of nurturing, being sensitive, empathetic, intuitive, compromising, caring, cooperative, and accommodative are increasingly associated with effective leadership.

Hudson and Rea (1996) believe that there is a distinctive difference between the way men and women manage. For instance, men are traditionally associated to be authoritative, decisive, controlling and unemotional and these traits seem to be respected more than the management of women due to a series of myth such as (a) women do not have what it takes, and (b) women lack

support of teachers and the community. Therefore, they state that the most common reasons presented in the literature for the underrepresentation of women in school administration is negative perceptions of women's ways of leading. However, as per this study there are other barriers such as family obligation, social responsibilities, cultural and societal norms which hinder women from taking up leadership roles in schools.

Methods

This study was carried out qualitatively with roots in phenomenology in which participants' experiences were studied to get an in-depth understanding of women leadership in Bhutanese schools. Among the four paradigms, the study of women educational leaders' lived-experiences suited well with social constructivism. This study examined the lives of women principals in Bhutanese schools to find out their lived experiences as women leaders. Creswell (2007) also points out that research on women leadership is generally pursued from a feminist point of view. This matches the researcher's passion as a feminist researcher as this research was carried out to highlight the strengths of women leadership and inherent barriers to it. Furthermore, women leadership in education is an issue and barriers to women's leadership in Bhutanese schools have not been previously studied.

Creswell (2007) further asserts that qualitative approach is best used to study a research problem when the problem needs to explore a complex issue, which needs detailed understanding of the issue. This study looked into the lives of the women principals in Bhutanese schools and examined their life experiences and challenges.

Participants

For this study, five principals (three male and three female principals) from Thimphu and Gelephu were selected for the interview along with ten students from two different higher secondary schools in Thimphu (five male and five female) who have the experience of being with both male and female principals. Five teachers (two males and three females) who have worked with both male and female principals were also interviewed from primary and higher secondary schools in Thimphu. Four women vice principals from middle and higher secondary schools in Thimphu who have been serving as vice principals for more than five years were interviewed to understand their

interest and challenges in taking up the role of principal. There were a total of 20 participants. To maintain confidentiality, the participants are provided pseudonyms in the report.

Instruments

To collect data on women leadership in Bhutanese schools, semi-structured interview guide was developed and used as it involved a series of open-ended questions based on the topic the researcher intended to cover. This structure provided opportunity to the interviewer and interviewee to discuss the topic in great detail by providing cues and prompting to encourage the interviewee. The interviews were recorded, with the consent of the interviewee and transcribed later for further analysis.

Data analysis

Creswell (2003) asserts that the process of qualitative data analysis involves making sense of the text and image data. Qualitative data analysis primarily entails classifying things, person, and events and the properties, which characterize them. This involves transcribing interviews, sorting and arranging the data into different themes through in-depth study. The researcher collected data in natural settings protecting the privacy and rights of the informants and the people being studied and further analysed the data inductively to establish patterns or themes; a coding process was used to generate a description of the setting as well as categories or theme; the actual data from the field were used to generate the themes.

 Accordingly, five themes emerged namely, perspectives on women leadership status in Bhutanese schools, how women leaders lead distinctively from man and their advantages, barriers to women leadership and support mechanism for women leadership in Bhutanese schools.

Findings

Findings from this study are divided into two sections. The first section presents status of women leadership, how women leaders lead distinctively from male leaders and advantages of women leaders in Bhutanese schools. The second section highlights the challenges of women leaders in schools.

The Annual Education Statistics (MoE, 2019) report shows that 41% of the total government teachers are females but only about 0.2 percent of the female teachers are at the leadership

positions serving as principals across the country. Most of the participants of this study felt that the number of women leaders should be proportionate to the ratio of men and women teachers. In the words of one of the male students (Student5 [S5]), "I am surprised to know that there are just few female leaders, I never expected that the number would be that few". Another female student (S3) adds, "I feel sad and surprised to know about the inequality in the number of women and men leaders in our schools." A student respondent (S6) commented, "This small number shows that women are still behind in Bhutanese society." A male principal (Principal4 [P4]) said, " women are not good at problem solving and decision making", which according to him is an important skill of a leader in schools. His statement proves that stereotype on women's leadership ability still exists amongst well-educated and qualified Bhutanese men. According to Thinley et al. (2014), similar findings were reported about the existence of some elements of prejudice regarding women leadership performance and abilities in Bhutanese society. An earlier research (Pem, 2015) has also underscored that male leaders have the perception that women generally do not make good leaders. These findings tell us that stereotypical prejudice about women leadership does exist strongly in Bhutanese society and workplaces. In the words of one male student (S3), "Women leaders in the school will contribute to inspiring and motivating our girls to become women leaders in future", Teacher participants (T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5) were also of the view that women leaders can be effective role models for girl students to take up leadership roles when they grow up. From these perspectives, it is clear that women leadership in Bhutanese schools is an issue which has not got its fair share of discussion and attention. Therefore, this study provides a reason to probe the question further about women leadership in Bhutanese schools, looking at specific skill sets and leadership competencies.

Women Leaders Lead Distinctively from Male Leaders

It has been observed by all the participants that there are differences between the management style of the male and female leaders as per their lived experiences. Many of the participants saw that women leaders apply democratic principles, whereas men seem to apply more autocratic approach in dealing with their students and teachers. For instance, one of the female teachers (T1) opined that she found it difficult to deal with a male a principal to the extent that she could not even ask for leave when her child was seriously ill. However, she mentioned that her life as a teacher changed and became better and comfortable when she started working with a woman

principal. Most respondents (S1, S2, S4, T1, T2) expressed that women leaders portray motherly figures and are more understanding and compassionate with their teachers and students. In an interview by NDTV on 12 June, 2020 the Dalai Lama said, "If more women were world leaders, there would be fewer problems". This according to Dalai Lama is because females have a better sense of concern for others, are more compassionate and less aggressive, and therefore if world leaders were predominantly female then problems in the world would be fewer. Dema (2017) also found that the exceptional qualities of female educational leaders are their expression of emotions like love, care and compassion for their school, students and staff. Growe and Montgomery (1999) assert that good school administration is more attuned to feminine than masculine modes of leadership behaviour. Female attributes such as nurturing, being sensitive, empathetic, intuitive, compromising, caring, cooperative and accommodative are increasingly associated with effective administration. Some respondents (VP1, T1, T3 & S3) are of the opinion that women leaders are more approachable as they can easily connect with students and teachers. One of the female vice principals (VP1) argued that, "Women leaders are more passionate about their job and that they understand the needs of students and teachers better". Furthermore, Dotzler (1993) in a study on women leaders in Canada found that women administrators' greatest values were concerns for children and their positive learning experiences. Similarly, there is a general agreement that these attributes are important leadership competencies.

Advantages of Female Leaders in Bhutanese Schools

Respondents (S5 & S6) assert that women leaders in schools can connect easily with their students which help to build better relationship. One female student (S3) also added that female leaders bring in that motherly care and compassion from home and leads the school with principles of care, compassion and kindness, which can make a lot of difference to the ambience of the school. Another male student (S1) observed that, "Female principals focus on academic development of the students; they work with integrity, hard work and determination, whereas male principals are more concerned about the physical development of the school and in the process they do not care much about the other development of the students. Another female student (S5) said that some male principals use force as their weapon to instil fear in their students, which do not help to develop strong relationship with them, whereas female leaders are more caring and understanding. This finding is also supported by the earlier study by Dema (2015) where she says that the special

care and love that women leaders bring into the school emanate from her experiences of being a daughter and a wife, which adds value to her leadership character.

A teacher (T5) observed that female principals stay on with their job for longer period of time compared to male principals. This longer stay in the school helps to develop the school better with clear vision and mission. One of the vice principals (VP3) stated that if the school has a female leader, it might help to curb the many sexual abuses and harassments happening in the Bhutanese schools. One of the incidents of sexual abuse cases reported by Tshomo (2018), the perpetrator was the vice principal of the same school. Another sexual abuse incident reported by Dema (2018) that happened in one of the schools in Gelephu, the perpetrator was also a male teacher. If these schools had female principals, the incidents could have been avoided as girl students would report about their problems to female leaders. Unfortunately, these schools did not have female leaders. National Commission for Women and Children (2008) reveals that there is a need to actively promote women's participation in the teaching profession in rural communities as there is a lack of role models for girl students in such areas. The lack of models may have an impact on girls' overall development. Most of the student respondents and teachers (S1, S2, S4, T1, & T2) feel that women leaders will be able to empower girl students to become stronger and more sensitive to their vulnerabilities and threats.

Barriers to Women Leadership in Bhutanese Schools

The barriers to women school leaders identified are: 1) Demands of family life; 2) Male dominated society; and 3) Place of posting for women leaders.

1. Demands of Family Life

Most of the respondents felt (P1, P2, VP1, VP2) that women do not opt to become school leaders because of family obligations although women are equally qualified. Almost all the respondents agreed that Bhutanese society is still dominated by men and consider them as breadwinners, whereas women are seen to have the role of raising family and taking care of the house. According to the study carried out by Tshomo et al. (2012, p.25), that "Bhutanese women enjoy relatively higher status compared to their counterparts in the neighbouring countries in terms of access to education, yet more subtle inequalities exist stemming from culture and traditions." This finding

is supported by one of the lady principals (P1) who said that Bhutanese society still regards fathers as the breadwinner of the family and this has the bearing on women when they take up leadership roles. Another female principal (P2) asserts that her husband gets more leisure time than her as he is not concerned about housekeeping and other chores at home. Dema (2017) is also of the view that women at high ranking leadership positions are also not spared from their duties of taking care of old parents, raising children and carrying out a huge part of daily chores and family responsibilities. This dual role of juggling between family and career deprive women of advancing their career. In the words of one female vice principal (VP3), "I opted out to become a principal as I was posted in [a] remote place and had to sacrifice for my family." Another female vice principal who had opted to step down as a vice principal from principal's position also mentioned that she made the choice because of her family obligation as she did not get her transfer to be with her family. These findings tell us that for most women, career is not their priority but their family and spouse become their priority in life, which hinders their career progression. According to the study carried out by Thinley et al. (2014) on the local government election, they also found that the double burden of looking after the family and taking up leadership roles in the community is not an option for many women at the village level. It is perceived to be challenging for women to take up the leadership positions as they have to shoulder family responsibilities.

2. Male Dominated Society

Most of the women principals and vice principals agree that they live in a male dominated society and it is challenging to work in such a society, when most male counterparts feel threatened by their position. One female principal (P2) asserts, "Even as a husband they feel inferior to have their wives holding higher position compared to their own positions. Similarly, Pem (2015) argues that leadership model in Bhutan is a male model and women are not encouraged to take up leadership roles. Likewise, Dema (2017) also maintains that due to the lack of women role model, she had to mimic the male leadership secretly during her early phase of becoming a school leader. She further explained that women need more females as role models to inspire other women and craft their own leadership path. Another woman leader (P1) said that men have poor image of women leadership. This statement was also supported by (VP1) who added, "Most men feel that women would not make a good principal because of their generalized views." One of the male principals (p4) expressed that women leaders are not capable of working in poor environment and another

male principal (p3) is also of the view that women are not capable of making good decisions. Thinley et al. (2014, p.111) confirms that stereotypes about women leadership do exist in Bhutanese society. One of the vice-principals (VP1) argued that during interviews, the panel members are typically dominated by male and it becomes difficult for the female candidate to prove her abilities. Moreover, the selection criteria has always been the same for all the candidates. According to Pem (2015, p. 33), "Policy makers are generally men and this leads to having work environment suited to only male and the policies mostly benefiting them." This proves that Bhutan still has weak gender sensitivity mechanism in many workplaces. Therefore, most respondents found that the criteria for principal selection are too harsh on women. In the words of one teacher respondent (T6), "Our policy is so rigid." They feel that leadership ability is not given due consideration as criteria such as rural posting and related factors are more dominant. She also said (Dema p.15) having more female leaders in schools can help empower girls and in doing so can help Bhutan engage as a more equitable democracy. Therefore, with the rising number of girl students and female teachers in schools, there is a need for more women role models.

3. Place of Posting for Women School Leaders

Almost all the respondents felt that the place of posting for female leaders has not favoured women to take up roles of the school principal. Women leaders opting to take up principal's roles are measured at par with male leaders and posted in places which compels them to stay away from their family as many schools are located in far flung places. This has hindered the growth of leadership in many women working in schools. According to VP2, "place of posting should be given to women considering her family interest too" Other respondents (S4 & T5) also agree that priority should be given to women leaders to choose the place of posting. According to one respondent (VP3), "Most of the lady vice principals have husband[s] working in urban areas, as such when they do not get their preferred place of posting, they opt out from taking up leadership roles." They feel that women are equally confident and qualified to take up the role of the school principals. In all the interviews with the teachers and principals, the place of posting for women school leaders has come up as a strong factor that discouraged women from being school leaders. Pem (2015) asserts that the government does have policies which state that transfers should be considered for marital cases, however she strongly feels that this policy benefits mostly working men instead of working women (p.33).

4. Support Mechanisms for Women Leadership

All the interviewees responded that women leadership in schools is a necessity and that Bhutanese society should support women to take up leadership roles in schools. Training is one of the areas that have emerged as a suitable intervention to support women. If there are separate trainings for lady teachers to help them grow, more women might apply for leadership positions in schools. In the words of one of the teacher respondents (T3), "training, workshops and exposure trips are necessary to encourage lady teachers to take up leadership roles." One of the vice principals (VP2) mentioned that impact study of women leadership in the schools should be carried out to find if there is a need to support women leadership in the schools. She further added that women leadership quota should be considered so as to encourage and promote women leaderships in the schools.

One student (S2) suggests that the selection announcement for principals in few schools could be done only for women candidates, so that there would be good chance for women candidates to become school leaders. Few teachers (T2, T3 & T5) also felt that some form of quota should be kept for women leaders in the school as to promote and motivate women to take up school leadership roles. Dema (2017) posits that Bhutanese women are genuinely interested in taking up leadership roles but the lack of good women role models impedes their transition into leaders.

Recommendations

Equitable representation of women in educational leadership is important for numerous reasons. It provides role models for female students and teachers. There is a need to seriously review the current situation of women leadership in schools if gender equity is to be achieved in leadership and management especially in Bhutanese schools. Therefore, the following recommendations are made in line with the findings of the study:

There is an urgent need to relook into the policy of transfer and placement of women leaders. It is recommended that some consideration and flexibility be put in place for the placement of women school leaders, as it is evident that the number of women principal is much higher during the time when there was some flexibility in the placement rules. In between 2005 and 2012, there were about 15 women leaders, whereas in 2019, there were only 10 women Principals across the country.

It is also recommended that regular training and mentoring be provided to encourage women vice principals to take up the role of principals. Most often, plans and policies for women are made by men who are in power rather than involving women in developing policies and plans for the cause of women. If this practice continues, achievement of gender equality in school leadership could be challenging.

As this study found that the data related to women leaders in many of the educational documents such as educational statistics and policies are vague or incomplete, it is recommended that clear data of women school leaders be documented and highlighted in educational statistics and other documents to help carry out further research and studies. Furthermore, clear statistics could reveal the real need for women leadership in Bhutanese schools which would benefit gender mainstreaming and promotion of gender equality in public offices and educational institutions.

This study revealed numerous advantages of women leaders in Bhutanese schools Therefore, there is a need to assess and highlight the impact of such leadership types in national discussions and policies to encourage and motivate women teachers to take up leadership roles. This could have a positive effect on girl children in their overall growth and development.

Future studies could be undertaken to understand women leadership in Bhutanese schools and its advantages focusing more on specific impacts and strengths of women leadership, including case studies of effective women leadership.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the advantages of women leadership in schools. Generally, it has been found out that women make good school leaders especially in term of nurturing children with strong care, love and compassion, which are critical competencies in the 21st century. These skills also contribute to stronger relationship and bonding in work place, resulting in heightened effectiveness and efficiency as a leader.

The study has also found that there are inherent barriers to women leadership in schools, including weaknesses in policy, system, environment and actual implementation of policies. There are also challenges related to traditional perspectives and gender roles that are perceived to be impeding

effectiveness of women as school leaders. However, many of these challenges as this study established are attributable to gaps in effective implementation of policies and generalized assumptions related to women's role in the society.

More specifically, it is clear from the findings of this study that the need for women to balance home and work is not the sole reason for not taking up the leadership positions even though this consideration definitely seems to affect women's decision to take up leadership role as found in this study. In spite of these challenges, women are ready to take up leadership positions as principals if there were flexibility and consideration in the place of posting for them. The place of their posting away from their family emerged as one of the most significant barriers to women taking up leadership positions as principals. Over the years, the number of women in principal's positions has decreased as per the statistics of Ministry of Education which is affected by rigidity in the place of posting. The policies on transfer and placement have not changed much. In fact, when the number of women principals was large in late 2000s, the placement policies were much more flexible as most of the women principals were placed with their spouse. However, as the placement policies became more rigid for women, the number of women principals have decreased over the years.

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