

Courage, Determination and Resilience: Career trajectories of Women school heads in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explored the personal and professional trajectories of school headship of five women heads, selected through snowball sampling, in a province of Pakistan. The data collected through semi-structured interviews revealed valuable insights into how women heads of schools experienced headships. The data revealed that women school heads faced challenging circumstances in traditional and conservative communities. These women took charge of the schools that faced lack of basic physical facilities, education office cooperation, and resistance from teachers in the way of positive change. Despite all these difficulties, these women remained firm, took the challenge with resolve and made a difference. Findings indicate commonalities of experiences in the stories of these women school heads. The study has important implications for stakeholders in the school level education in Pakistan.

Keywords: Narrative Method, Gender-Leadership, Positive Self-Perception.

Introduction

Leadership is of the most important factors in the success or otherwise of a school. Female school leaders often play important role in the development of schools and in shaping the direction that schools take. In many traditional societies female school heads like females in other leading roles face significant challenges in their leading roles. Studies identify problems that school heads often come across.¹ Though female school heads face different kinds of problems depending upon the contexts of their leading role, one of the most difficult situation they often faces, working in

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conservative, gender insensitive areas. The current study explored the perceptions of women school heads in a conservative socio-cultural milieu in the north-west of Pakistan. The study highlights significant issues that women school leaders face. The study also brings forth the determination, resilience and courage that these women school leaders show in playing their role as successful leaders and as change agents in the society.

Literature Review

School heads often face challenges when working in places with issues such as poverty, and and lack of adequate human resource.² Such situations negatively affect school heads' roles, often leading to emotional imbalance, and a sense of helplessness.^{3,4} Within the context of the present study, the public sector schools are presenting different challenging situations to the school heads, especially for women. The most common problems among them are the government drive to enroll maximum children in schools that has resulted in the overcrowded classrooms, the shortage of qualified teaching staff and unfavorable leading situation. Since the school head is a key player in the students' academic achievements and the building a learning environment in school.⁵ the leadership scholars have pointed out that there is still paucity of research regarding school based leadership studies.

The job of most school heads is multi-dimensional needing a systematic and planned approach to get the desired outcomes⁶. The leadership role involves a number of activities including (a) planning, (b) supervising, (c) organizing, (d) managerial tasks, (e) financial responsibilities and (f) pedagogical tasks⁷. It can be argued that the leadership style and the commitment shown by the school head has the predisposition to influence teachers' motivational level and turnover intent based on the existence of friendly learning environment, job related autonomy and innovative work climates. This study addressed the question, posed in much of the gender research, of what motivates or drives women to undertake the role of a school headship and what are their experiences of the leading role.⁸ Studies in different parts of the world identify challenges that female heads face. Many of these studies reveal that female principals in more traditional societies face societal demands and traditions not usually faced by males. Many women in leadership role have to deal with dilemmas regarding contrasting expectations in their family and work-life responsibilities.⁹ Other research suggests that women leadership skills are often marred by the dual expectations from them in

comparison to males.¹⁰ Women leaders also face issues related to lack support from the staff, parents and community which is not the case with male principals. Women school leaders' perceptions regarding their leadership role are important as such perceptions are critical in understanding their self-perceptions as leaders and in knowing the difference between successful and unsuccessful female school leaders. The current study explores questions, posed in much of the gender research, of what motivates or drives women to undertake the role of a school headship and what are their experiences of the leading role in the Pakistani context.^{11, 12}

Research Methodology

This study was qualitative (narrative approach) in which the five female school heads were interviewed, using semi-structured interviews, in order to explore their experiences about their school leading role. Narrative approach is useful for understanding how people's lives are affected by how, where, when and by whom in social setting; we get answers to these questions through stories that the people tell us about their lived experiences¹³. The sample for this study was based on snowballing technique. Data was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis.¹⁴

Findings

Nadia's account

Nadia was 50, a widow having three children and the head of a big girls' high school in a thickly populated urban area. She became girls' school head in 2014 at the age of 50 on the basis of departmental promotion. She narrated:

"When I took charge of the school a few years ago, everything was in bad shape. The reason behind this situation was that the school had been leaderless for many years. As I came in, I realized that this was the test of my leadership skills. I held myself responsible. Now the school is well on the track especially as far academic performance in concern."

Though, Nadia was very much concerned about girls' education in this conservative-religious locality, but she had also been facing constant tensions and problems from the influential people. The school community where Nadia's school was located was conservative in nature. A majority of the people migrated from the villages and rural areas of Pakistan. Nadia's main concern was to sensitize the parents about the female education. She argued that

the main reason behind lack of interest in female education is the conservative thinking of the local community and early marriages of females in the area. Another source of frustration for Nadia was the lack of professionalism on the part of her school teachers. She stated:

“The most disturbing thing for me is the unprofessional attitude of the female school teachers. Some of the general problems which I have been facing are the teachers’ late arrival, early departure, lack of quality teaching on the part of them and non-cooperation with me.”

Nadia also pointed out her unpleasant experiences with the education department. She said that education department did not provide much support in her role as a head. She identified lack of interest, red-tapism and incompetence of the department as issues that impacted her performance as a head. Being the part of traditional society, Nadia had to manage her home and job related responsibilities. Nadia’s husband died when she was young and had three kids. This led to immense hardships for her as young widow, mother and as a professional in a conservative social environment. Interestingly, despite her difficult conditions Nadia had a positive self-perception about her professional role as she argued:

“The Education Department has given me respect for my determination, and commitment to my professional role. My personal mission is to bring positive change. Whenever I work as a head, I become famous for bringing good change. That is a source of satisfaction for me.”

Aleena’s account

Aleena was 51 and the head of a girls’ government higher secondary school in a militancy hit area. The area lacked facilities such as electricity, basic health facilities, and basic security. Aleena was mother of a daughter. Her husband was a retired professor. She narrated:

“I joined school level teaching by choice. I joined the Education Department as a Subject Specialist (SS)-Chemistry. On the basis of promotion I was appointed as a school head in 1998.”

Aleena faced problems such as frequent security checks by law enforcement agencies, passing through desolated roads and fear of being coming under militant attacks. She became a well known

figure in educational community of the area, because of her courage and determination. She said:

“When I was posted as a school head, there was no computer, printer and other basic office stationery. The education office did not provide enough assistance. So I arranged all the needed materials from my own pocket to serve the poor girls of this area.”

Aleena was committed to her role as a change agent.

“The people of that area are conservative and poor. Most of the girls leave their education before completing secondary level. Bringing poor girls to education is the most difficult task for me. There is poverty everywhere and poverty is the enemy of these girls.”

Despite all these odds and difficulties, Aleena was optimistic to bring change through education in the attitudes of parents and their daughters. For Aleena change for women meant thinking beyond the existing cultural stereotyped notions and standing for their own rights.

Faiza’s account

Faiza was 45 and was leading a girls’ high school in an outskirts of a big city. She lived with her husband and three daughters. When Faiza completed her 12 years of college education, she wanted to join engineering college. But the social moors frustrated her career choice. Faiza continued her education till university level and did masters in Maths. She narrated:

“I joined public sector school teaching cadre after just completing my Master in Mathematics. I was appointed as Subject Specialist-Maths. I was on teaching post for about 15 years, then on the basis of departmental promotion I was appointed as the head of a girls’ high school.”

Faiza led a school which was located adjacent to a big city in a conservative and traditional community, where the people were poor. Faiza said:

“The school classrooms are overcrowded; the girls are sitting in verandas. There is shortage of female teaching staff. Basic facilities are lacking, no electricity. The government has been pressing for more enrollments. That has badly affected the quality of teaching learning process in the school.”

Faiza also showed her frustration over the lack of power to bring any change in the school physical infrastructure. She described:

The difficult part of my role is having no power to decide about the basic school level issues. Even for minor things we have to take permissions from the Education Office. That is frustrating.

Faiza, however, was committed to her role. She was more focused on the teaching learning side of her role. That's why her school was celebrated for students' academic achievement. Faiza expressed:

"Though there are different problems in this school, but my focus is on quality education. For this I personally talk to teachers and students in order to address their problems on time. My school annual results are excellent and that is a source of happiness for me to educate the poor girls of this locality. I felt proud of my leading role, because I knew how important my role was in that locality."

Chaand's account

Chand was 45, living with her husband and three children. After 21 years of teaching she was promoted to school leading role a year ago. The school that she had to lead was located in a conservative society, where female literacy rate was very low. Girls were not normally allowed to attend the schools. The school was newly upgraded and lacked facilities but she was determined and committed. She made an effort to get the much needed furniture for her school. She asserted:

"I am not a pessimistic lady. I love to be in difficult situations to test my mental toughness. The school that I am leading is difficult to run, but my determination is high. "

Chaand had arranged, for the time being, the office furniture with help of a well-off person of the school locality. She had been encouraging the mothers of the girls in her school locality to send their daughters to the school. Though, Chaand was school head, she also taught to different classes, just like other teachers. She commented:

"I had been a school teacher for about 21 years. I believe teachers can bring big change in the personality of students. Therefore, I regularly take classes."

Chaand believed that a leader should be a source of inspiration for her staff. That's why she used to take initiatives in every effort in order to bring positive change in the school. She argued:

“I take initiative. I set myself as an example. My school teaching staff follows me in this regard. I believe in team work.”

Sultana’ account

Sultana was 50; she had four daughters, and was living with her husband. After serving for about 18 years as a school teacher, she was promoted as a school head. Sultana narrated:

“One the most disturbing situation that I faced in this school was the shortage of female teachers, which was badly affecting the teaching learning process.”

Sultana started contacting other school heads and teachers in different female schools and persuaded them to transfer to her school. She said:

“Though this was a daunting task for me but I had determination, I wanted to contribute in the system, I felt responsible to these girls, I felt responsible to their parents, I felt responsible to God.”

Sultana felt a good deal of satisfaction in playing her role as a dynamic leader, improving her school in a difficult situation.

Discussion

The personal stories of the women school heads in this study revealed challenging situations they faced. Their role as women leaders continuously faced challenges in the traditional and conservative communities. Despite challenges these women remained steadfast in doing their jobs with diligence and patience. Belief in service, duty and care is a frequent theme in much of the literature on women school heads’ narratives.^{15,16} There is evidence of the way women school heads show determination to ‘lead caring, nurturing institutions in which the focus is constantly on pupil welfare and achievement’¹⁷. The theory of caring and nurturing especially in female school leadership has been focused area.^{18,19} In support of the findings of this study, research²⁰ shows that school leaders inherited schools with discipline issues related with the school teaching staff and students, inadequate physical infrastructure and ineffective school environment. Previous studies indicate that one of the major concerns of the school heads lack of responsibility on the part of teachers and other staff. School heads often face teachers’ politics that revolve around their personal interest rather than welfare of students and their responsibilities.²¹ School heads often have stressful experiences in terms of dealing with uncooperative staff and educational officials.²²

The findings of this study are in line with studies that indicate that a lack of physical facilities and lack of conducive learning environment leads to frustration on the part of school leaders.²³

Despite all the odds that the women school heads had to pass through, they had positive self-perception about their leading role. They were committed and wanted to bring change through education for the betterment of women status. School heads felt satisfied and honored in their leading role. This is congruent to studies that indicate that switching of role from school teacher to school head changes a person's self-perceptions and identity. Identity has also been put forward as a product of organizational interaction, which in turn gives a person emotional stability, self-confidence and self-efficacy.²⁴ Studies have also found that a school leader's positive self-perception about his or her leading role serve a base for effective leadership.^{25, 26}

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored women school heads perceptions regarding their roles as school heads and the challenges they faced in their roles. The study was conducted as a qualitative, narrative study that explored women school leaders' experiences regarding their roles. The study indicated that these women heads are resilient and determined to lead their school in difficult circumstances. The main sources of these women's strength seem to be their commitment to their role, their resilience and their belief in the positive change that their role can bring about. It can be inferred from this study that agency, in its manifestation of self-confidence, self-belief and a strong sense of purpose, is a key determinant in women leaders' ability to demonstrate their capabilities against the odds. It is apparent that for these women, their agency is uncompromisingly coupled with their faith in themselves and in their ability to make positive contribution. The findings of this study cannot be generalised in the quantitative research sense but qualitative, inductive inferences can be made in situations with similar contexts. Further leadership related research is needed for deeper insights into such issues areas with similar contexts in and outside Pakistan.

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