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AN INVESTIGATION ON THE EXPERIENCES ON WOMEN LEADERS OF THE SELECTED SCHOOLS IN THE GAMPAHA DISTRICT IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Aim of this study was to explore the educational leadership experiences of women working in the Gampaha district government schools. While much research about women leadership had been carried out, very little has been undertaken in Sri Lanka. This study was in the nature of an interpretive paradigm, and qualitative research method was employed. The specific focus of this research design had emerged out to achieve following objectives: Identify the selection methods used in appointing women leaders in schools, challenges are faced by women leaders in schools, leadership styles were used by women leaders, and the training women leaders have undergone before taking up their leadership positions. Research data was gathered using semi-structured interview method from three principals, three deputy principals and three sectional heads from three 1 AB schools. Purposive and random sampling techniques were used to select sample in this study. Nine educational leaders were selected since this study expected to get an in depth understanding of the study phenomenon. Data gathered were analyzed using thematic analytical approach. This study revealed that most of the women leaders were appointed through formal selection procedures while some leaders were appointed through informal selection mechanisms. The women in the domestic sphere were found as a challenge to fulfillment of their leadership responsibilities. There was no initial leadership or management training for most of the women leaders before taking up their leadership roles. There was lack of consultation and support from higher officers and the other women leaders especially in problematic situations. Women leaders identified with the collaborative style of leadership, the women had low self - confidence and low self esteem which inhibited them in their leadership role. It is recommended that to give appropriate management training to the women leaders and build up a team leadership environment in the school.

Key Words: Woman Leadership, Educational Leadership, School Leadership, Women Leadership Experiences

INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, total population was 20,450,000 in 2009, work force participation was 47.7%. According to Central Bank report 2010, total labour force participation in the island was; male - 66.6%, female - 33.4%. However majority of the staff members in the public schools was female. However, most of the principal and deputy principal positions were held by males in Sri Lanka (School censuses 2008). More over it was stated that, most of the educational administration and leadership positions such as principal, deputy principal and sectional heads in Sri Lankan schools were filled pre dominantly by men (Ministry of Education and School censuses, 2006).

Statistics illustrate that women were grossly under represented as school leaders. The issue raised here is one of social injustice within educational leadership with regard to gender inequality. In addition, while much research to date had been carried out in relation to school management, very little had been carried out on women leadership in the government schools. As such, we know very little about women and educational leadership in school. Until now, no much qualitative research has been undertaken to explore the perspectives and experiences of women leaders in the government schools in Sri Lanka.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

According to the Central Bank Report in Sri Lanka (2010) and School Censuses in 2008, Majority of labour force participation was of males. When somebody looks at the school education sector in Sri Lanka, total teacher population was represented by females. However majority of principal and deputy principal positions were represented by males. Table 01 shows the school information and the statistics about teacher population in 2008 as follows.

Table 01: School statistics -2008

School type	No. of schools	of teachers	Teacher %
1AB	698	57,474	27
1C	1,937	67,514	31.7
2	4,166	67,957	31.8
3	2,861	20,267	9.5
Total	9,662	213, 212	100

Source- Central Bank report-2010

In the school context, the majority of principals were male and very few were women. However a large number of females held principal and deputy principal positions in girls schools. Since there was a dearth of either published research studies on women leadership in the government schools in Sri Lanka, or in-depth investigations of those directly involved in the women leadership positions in schools findings of this study would therefore contribute to a better understanding of the real situation of women leadership in the government schools in Sri Lanka, and challenges and issues of those involved in women leadership in schools. Such an understanding may assist educational leaders in managing the change process associated with the implementation of school management strategies. In addition, their views may be very useful for the future policy decisions in relation to appointing school leaders, formulation and implementation of training programmes for school leaders.

Problem Statement

Principals, deputy principals and sectional heads perform an important role in the government schools in Sri Lanka. Male principals and deputy principals represent most leadership positions in schools where as majority of the assistant teachers in those schools is females (Censuses, 2008). However, exploration of woman leaders'

experiences in the schools was very helpful to understand the actual school leadership situation in Sri Lanka. Dearth of number of published qualitative research studies of those directly involved in the women leadership in the government schools have been sought to date. Therefore, it was important to explore the experiences of those involved, such as principals, deputy principals, and sectional heads in school leadership.

In view of this, this study was underpinned by the following questions. What are the leadership experiences of women leaders in the government schools in Sri Lanka: What kind of selection procedures are followed to appoint women leaders? What are the challenges faced by women leaders in school management? How do they apply their leadership styles in managing schools/sections/divisions? What is the nature of the obstacles and barriers they faced in fulfilling their leadership responsibilities? And what kind of training have they undergone in taking up their leadership positions?

The qualitative research framework of this study will therefore support a better understanding of the nature of women leadership in schools, complementing and enriching the quantitative research findings. The findings of this qualitative study may provide useful insights to guide future decision-making in relation to women leaders in school at various levels of both policy and implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In countries like Australia, (Blackmore, 2006), Great Britain (Coleman, 2005; Evetts, 1994; Hall, 1996), New Zealand (Court, 2005; Strachan, 1999) and the USA (Shakeshaft, 1987), although the majority in the teaching profession are women, only relatively small proportions hold senior leadership and management positions in educational settings. In Sri Lankan context, majority of school teacher positions were held by women teachers in Sri Lankan schools (School Censuses, 2006). However, in Sri Lankan situation, majority of school principals were not female. There were women principals in most of the girls' schools and few in the mixed schools (School Censuses, 1996). Majority of principal and deputy principal positions in schools were held by male.

Over the years, there had been considerable discussion in the literature about the similarities and differences between the notions of leadership, management and administration. According to Schon (1983), leadership and management are not synonymous terms. Schon (1983) and Yukl (2002) pointed out that one can be a leader without being a manager and one can manage without leading. Some writers who make the distinction between leadership and management recognized that the two concepts overlap and are both necessary for organizational success (Early & Weindling, 2004; Fullan, 2002).

There is no agreed definition of the concept of leadership. The literature that focused on women and educational leadership in developed countries is now extensive (Blackmore, 2002; Coleman, 2005; Coleman, Haiyan, & Yanping, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1987). Yukl (2002) argued that "the definition of leadership is arbitrary and very subjective. Some definitions are more useful than others; however there is no "correct" definition.

Early and Weindling (2004) stated that: Leadership tends to be more formative, proactive and problem solving, dealing with such things as values, vision and mission, whereas the concerns of management are more to do with the execution, planning, organizing and deploying of resources or making things happen. Management is focused more on providing order and consistency to organizations (Early & Weindling, 2004).

When someone discusses about management process leading is one of the key functions of management. Stoner et al., (1995) stated the functions of management as: planning; organizing; leading and controlling. Early and Weindling (2004) definition highlighted the difference between management and leadership. Scholars, researchers and authors conversed about leadership styles and leadership approaches. There are different leadership approaches like: behavioural, autocratic, democratic, laissez faire, trait approach etc.

Whatever the leadership approach one adopts, there is little doubt that women have a great deal to contribute to the changing practice of educational leadership in response to the radical global restructuring of education (Cubillo & Brown, 2003). There are many different approaches to leadership. The approach that is usually associated with women is that of collaborative leadership. Women are seen by some as a new source of leadership talent because of their "caring and sharing propensities, their communicative and organizational skills and their capacity to listen to and empathize with the needs of others" (Blackmore, 2002). The collaborative and participatory style of management is the style most strongly identified with women leaders (Coleman, 2002; Court, 1994; Hall, 1996; Morris, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1987).

Evetts (1994) found out that from the analysis of the responses from principals regarding which leadership characteristics each individual had, there was a great deal of variation amongst both the women and men. Nevertheless, Evetts (1994) noted that some of the male principals emphasized collegial relations and participatory forms of leadership in schools, while some of the female principals were inclined towards hierarchy and authority in management. This is similar to research conducted by Grace (1995) in which analysis of the accounts of the twenty four women principals showed that, in their view, some men and women operated relatively democratic and participatory decision – making regimes and some men and women did not. Nevertheless, Grace (1995) has noted that while there are emerging patterns of gender–power relations in school leadership, there is great potential in contradictions for women in leadership.

It is interesting to note that research on women leaders in developing countries, has highlighted that women prefer a collaborative style of leadership (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Morris, 1998; Morriss, Guat Tin, & Coleman, 1999; Soobrayan, 1998). It makes the assumption that research on the experiences of women in the Western world, are the same for women in developing countries (Oplatka, 2004, 2006).

Scholars have investigated several theories which have considered internal barriers faced by women who have attempted to gain formal leadership roles. These include a

lack of self – confidence, lack of competitiveness and a fear of failure (Banks, 1995; Bell & Chase, 1993). However, studies by Coleman (2002, 2005) have revealed that this lack of confidence is linked to the fact that the women have felt they were in an environment where leaders are expected to be male or they would be compared unfavourably with men. In spite of that, possibly one of the most surprising findings is the number of women principals who have simply drifted into principalship. This lack of planning is linked in some cases to a lack of confidence in their own ability. This sentiment is echoed by Chisholm (2001) although her participants attributed their lack of confidence in their leadership to issues of race and gender.

Coleman (2002) pointed out that there is a positive stereotype of identifying women as nurturing, caring and people oriented. This is because we are in a time when “emotional intelligence is being recognized as an essential component of leadership and management” (Coleman, 2002) and therefore this stereotype might even be thought to give women the advantage in terms of leadership style. Schmuck (cited in Coleman, 2002) argued that the socially constructed meaning of gender stereotypically classifies women in subordinate roles and identifies them with the domestic arena which is often seen as inferior to the public arena the proper place of men. These stereotypes identify women as less worthy or qualified than men to lead and manage (Coleman, 2002; Shakeshaft, 1993).

Furthermore, research has also shown that women are expected to exhibit behaviours associated with sex – role stereotypes in order to be viewed as women (Blackmore, 1999; Skrla et al., 2000). As Blackmore (1999) argued, there is the overt message that women must continue to be “feminine, sensitive and caring, otherwise they are not seen to be good leaders or good women”.

The selection procedures in place for those aspiring to leadership positions can be a hindrance for women. This area needs to be investigated as one continuous process which includes the recruitment selection and the appointment process (Bush & Middlewood, 2005) although each clearly involves a different stage. In Britain, local education authorities have wide discretion in developing their own selection process, which usually involves advertising, applying, selecting and interviewing (Evetts, 1994).

The literature suggests that in some countries, staff are nominated or appointed to their school organizations by Education Authorities (Bush & Middlewood, 2005). This is also the situation in Sri Lanka where the Education Authorities are responsible for the appointment of most of the staff members in schools. In other countries like New Zealand, the Board of Trustees are responsible for the selection of staff (Brooking, 2005). Brooking (2005) noted that while there were selection processes in place, they often had little to do with the final decision. This study found that there was a high degree of discrimination against women by some boards and a preference for male principals. In schools where women were appointed as principals, this was because no suitable male candidate had applied.

Brookings’ study (2005) revealed that: in many developing countries, women tend to take overall responsibility for domestic tasks and childcare. For married women leaders in developing countries, family responsibilities have a significant effect on their careers as leaders. As highlighted in a study on Chinese women in management by Coleman et al. (1998), it is believed by some women that the dual role that women leaders play, that of leader and a wife will affect their ability to progress in a career, irrespective of their potential to lead and quality of leadership. The women in this study stressed the difficulty of trying to balance all the different aspects of their roles with one another. They also highlighted that it was difficult to pursue a career as well as support family commitments especially when men do not do any housework. This view is similar to those expressed by South African women principals (Moorosi, 2007), particularly the married and younger women who were still able to bear children.

METHOD

In the context of this research, the qualitative approach to research was employed, and case study approach was employed to study this research problem in depth. Since this research aimed to uncover the live reality of research participants, case study as a qualitative research method, is more appropriate to study research problem. Because it has a number of advantages, for instance: case study approach can be used to investigate actual contemporary life settings and life cycles of people, and it allows researcher to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events of people. Simons (2009) provided a definition for case study as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a real life context” (Simons, 2009 in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). According to Simons’ definition of qualitative research, it was realized that a qualitative research method is more suitable in this study, and therefore case study approach was employed.

Aims of this study were to explore the experiences of the women leaders in the selection procedures for leadership posts, challenges, obstacles and barriers faced by women leaders in school management, their leadership styles applying in leading. The information provided by the participants was very significant in this study with the intention of understanding the real state of affairs in relation to the school leadership experiences in Sri Lanka.

Semi - structured interview methods were used to generate data in this research. There are a number of interview types but the type often used in qualitative educational research is the semi-structured interview since it has many advantages in qualitative research. Some questions that were predetermined in the semi-structured interview protocol in this study, and the other questions emerged to probe depths of the responses to the predetermined questions, or to clarify interviewee answers. There was sufficient flexibility to allow the interviewees in this study giving an opportunity to shape the flow of information. Open ended questions encouraged the interviewee to provide more information than closed questions.

The data in this research was gathered through interviews with nine women leaders in schools, three principals,

three deputy principals and three sectional heads. All the participants represented I AB type government schools in the Gampaha district, and three schools were selected randomly. Individual participants: principals selected purposively, and deputy principals and sectional heads were selected randomly. Individual interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. In order to analyse data in this study, thematic analytical approach was adopted. Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour of people. Thematic analysis is commonly used by researchers and in particular is suitable for analyzing and reporting personal qualitative interview data (Mutch, 2005). Therefore thematic analysis approach was undertaken in this study.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Information was collected from the women leaders in the government schools in this study. Three of them were principals and three women leaders were deputy principals. Two deputy principals had Postgraduate Diploma in Education; one had a Bachelor of Arts degree. Their main responsibilities were managing and leading school, and in general they do not teach in the classrooms. Three women leaders were sectional heads in their respective schools. One sectional head had a Postgraduate Diploma in Education and taught Sinhalese language in school. Two of them had Bachelor degrees. These two sectional heads taught Business Studies and Buddhism for the student in their respective sections. The women leaders' ages vary, from mid 30s to mid 50s. Most of them have started their careers as assistant teachers.

Selection

The participants in this study who hold the principal positions were from the principal service or educational administrative service, and all the deputy principals were from the principal service. Principals and deputy principals had been appointed by the Ministry of Education. However, the sectional heads were appointed internally by the principal of the respective schools. The selection criteria vary from school to school, and mostly assistant teachers were appointed as sectional heads. However, this appointment process was not quite transparent. One sectional head spoke about her experience as: *'I did not apply for this post. The principal saw that I have qualifications and she called me into her office and told me that there is a vacancy in a section, because one of the sectional heads had gone on study leave. I was advised to take up this position and I took it up accordingly'*. It seems that the top level leadership positions in the schools were appointed by the ministry of Education, and the other positions like sectional head were appointed internally by the principals.

Responsibilities

The women leaders in this study, especially sectional heads spoke a great deal about the lack of confidence that they sometimes felt. For most of them, this was their first time in a formal leadership position so it was hard for them to cope up with their responsibilities at school and also their roles as mothers and house wives. One sectional head stated her feelings as: *'There are occasions that I have low self esteem in myself. I feel that I am not fit to carry out this responsibility...I have to constantly battle and try to get over this. Also as a mother of children, it is very tiring taking care of them. Sometimes I feel that I*

should not have taken up this position but give it to someone else'.

The women in this study attributed their lack of confidence to their inexperience in the job and balancing family responsibilities. The ascribed roles of the women in the domestic sphere affected the fulfilment of the women's leadership roles. All the women leaders in this study had children and this created challenges for the women. One woman explained her responsibilities at home and how those affected her leadership role in school;

"For me, the difficulty in my leadership role is my responsibilities at home. Especially having kids, I have to make sure that everything at home is sorted. The children are fed and taken to school, the dishes are washed and the house is cleaned. Sometimes my responsibilities at home obstruct me from spending time to do my administration work in school".

Challenges

Family responsibilities at home also created a situation where family and work responsibilities collided. Balancing work and family life created challenges for the women. This sometimes put them in awkward positions, where they were forced to make a decision; whether to stay at home or go to school. The husbands played a huge role leading up to the decision.

The women leaders in this study, conveyed their feelings about being left out of the decision making process. There seems to be a breakdown in communication, especially with other leaders that they were working alongside. In particular, the women expressed their dissatisfaction with the overall leadership in their former schools, which were led by male principals.

Training

Majority of deputy principals and sectional heads had not undertaken any leadership or management training prior to taking up their leadership role in school. The importance of leadership preparatory programs was also talked about in relation to further leadership aspirations. Most of the women sectional heads and deputy principals had aspirations to pursue with their leadership but they felt that they needed to undergo training before they could apply for other leadership roles.

One sectional head stated about her further training needs as follows;

"I would like to apply for further leadership positions but I need training in management. I need to gain training in management because to manage a big group like a school, I see that as a big responsibility which needs training. At the moment, the knowledge I have about leadership I gained along the way as I started on the job and I learnt as I went along. I also attended small workshops which gave me ideas on how I can manage a school".

The women leaders also highlighted that the training should cater to everyone in the school but there were occasions that lack of action taken by the school administration disadvantaged them as well as other teachers. Nevertheless, where the women lacked the relevant knowledge about their job, the support that these

women received from their husbands played a huge part in their leadership. However, the women gave accounts where some other women were not so lucky.

One principal explained her feeling as; 'Women want to go for further studies but the husbands do not give appropriate support to their wives to carry out their studies smoothly'. For all these women leaders, even though they lacked formal training in leadership, they felt they could carry out their responsibilities but they needed mentors who would help them. This mentoring is very important especially for women who have been appointed to a new leadership position in school.

Women Leadership

The women in this study thought that women are very good leaders. They highlighted the importance of having role models, in particular, women as school leaders. They felt that having women in leadership positions in schools may help to change the way women leaders are viewed by the community. One principal explains:

"In the community national schools nowadays, you will start to see women teachers holding positions like sectional heads, deputy principals and in some schools, principals. This is very good. Because of this, people are now starting to see that women can lead too. I think it is only now that people are starting to realize that women can lead..."

The women also noted that schools that were led by women leaders are more effective in their leadership. One deputy principal stated as;

"I see that schools that are led by women, are better developed because they are honest in their leadership and are transparent and they try to lead ethically. Also the community is now starting to see that when there are women leaders in schools, the school produces good results and the schools are led in a way that the whole community now appreciates the work done by women leaders".

Relationships

When talking about good quality leadership, the women also highlighted the importance of relationships and collective decision-making. Being a good leader involves building and maintaining relationships with various groups. In the schools, those concerned are the teachers and students. This relationship needs to extend to other stakeholders such as the officers in the Education Authorities, Education Ministry, the community and the parents.

Leadership Style

While the women's perception of good leadership highlighted aspects of collaborative and servant leadership, their descriptions about their responsibilities and how they carry out those responsibilities in schools differ from their views. One deputy principal explained about her role responsibilities as;

'My responsibilities as deputy principal include assisting the principal especially with the running of the school programs. Mostly I'm involved in preparation of the school programs, student's discipline and welfare and also with the school finance like the collection of school

fees, although the principal is the head accounting officer of the school'.

These women leadership experiences were revealed through the emphasis of significant themes that arose out of in-depth interviews; in particular, the women spoke about their lack of confidence and the challenge of balancing family responsibilities and work in relation to their gender and culture. This impacted on their confidence in performing their leadership roles. This study revealed that collaborative leadership has been identified as the most effective leadership style in school. However, women leaders consider themselves to be better leaders than the male leaders in the system of school.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, the ascribed roles of the women in the domestic sphere were found to have impacted on their leadership, this study found that there was lack of consultation in the decision making process between women leaders and their male principals. The findings of this study also have indicated that some men do not take too kindly to women in leadership positions and behave negatively towards them. This study found out that the women had low self - confidence and low self esteem which inhibited them in their leadership role.

Selection procedures of appointing women leaders in schools should be very systematic and transparent. That may be helpful motivate the staff to work hard for the development of school.

The findings of this study have shown that while the women, especially deputy principals and sectional heads had no leadership training prior to taking up their leadership positions, hence they identify with the collaborative style of leadership.

Therefore it is recommended that to address the lack of initial leadership training for existing leaders, a programme should be introduced to develop proper leadership and management skills for women leaders in schools. The ideas and the contribution of women leaders should be included in this programme. An initial training should be given to the new recruits when they are enrolled as women leaders. If the women leaders are given appropriate training they may be able to fulfil their responsibilities with more confidence. It is also recommended that a network for women be formed by women for women so that women have a safe haven to come to, to unwind, discuss and share with other women leaders about the issues they face so as to empower one another, to gain strength and courage to continue to move forward in their leadership. It is easier to make change as a group rather than as an individual.

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