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# Women in Educational Leadership: A Comparison of Kenyan and Pakistani Women Educational Leaders

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## Abstract

*Though literature on educational leadership is expansive, most of it is related to the social and organisational structure of educational systems in the western world, thereby giving an impression that western models of leadership are universal. Hence, there is need to study school leadership in non-western countries because perspectives of educational leadership have been taken almost exclusively from western literature and practice.*

*Women in educational leadership are in a minority in Pakistan and Kenya, as is the case in many parts of the world. Whilst a number of writers have attempted to identify and categorise some of the internal and external barriers to the progress of women's careers in educational leadership, little discourse has occurred in both Pakistan and Kenya concerning how women experience leadership and even less about the role of gender in educational leadership. This paper, therefore, sets out to share findings of two studies on Pakistani and Kenyan women in educational leadership. It presents the similarities and differences between the women educational leaders' experiences from a gender perspective, in the two countries and discusses the implication of the findings in the provision of education, especially in light of the Education for All (EFA) targets of both Kenya and Pakistan.*

*The Pakistan study was a narrative inquiry based on several individual interviews with 4 the research participants and sought. A narrative approach was felt best suited to find out how the women have experienced and continue to experience gender in their positions of leadership. The Kenyan study, which is still currently going on, has employed the use of a life history approach as well as some ethnographic methods such as observations and document analysis. It has engaged 12 participants, though this paper presents findings from the first phase of the study which looked at how the personal and professional experiences of 6 women leaders have impacted on their leadership practices. For purposes of this paper, gender has been used as the dominating factor of analysis to frame the women's stories.*

## **Introduction**

Women in educational leadership are a minority in Pakistan and Kenya and in many other parts of the world as well. However, unlike many countries where women dominate the teaching profession and hence their absence at the management level is questionable, women teachers in Pakistan and Kenya make up only 31% and 40% respectively of the teaching force of the two countries (MOEST, 2004).

This low participation of women in teaching is due to the fact that female access to education is at a lower level than that of the males (Warwick & Reimers, 1995). Several reasons have been cited for the absence of girls and women in education, and these include poverty, cultural traditions and insecurity.

In both Kenya and Pakistan, the ‘silence’ on the issue of gender difference at the school leadership level, does not necessarily reflect their absence. Indeed, the very fact that teaching is a male dominated profession implies the absence of women in leadership positions in education. There has been an attempt on the part of both Pakistani and Kenyan governments to put up a career structure in order for teachers to enter managerial positions.

However, appointment to such levels is often largely dependent on the whims of influential persons in the higher echelons of the education ministry. As a result, few women are able to rise to the top of the profession. Men dominate and continue to dominate the decision making roles within the hierarchy.

Even though, a number of writers have attempted to identify and categorise some of the internal and external barriers to the progress of women’s careers in educational leadership (for example, Brown and Ralph, 1996; Hall, 1996; Coleman, 2001), little discourse has occurred in Pakistan and Kenya concerning how women are able to experience leadership, and there is even less about the role of gender in educational leadership.

However, while reviewing the composition of teachers in Africa, Central America and South Asia; Davies (1990) concluded that “educational administration is still seen as a masculine occupation in many countries” (p. 62). This is also a view that is held by Memon (2003) about educational leadership in Pakistan.

This paper, therefore, sets out to compare the experiences of women educational leaders in Kenya and Pakistan, with respect to their growth as women as well as in leadership. Two separate studies were used to study the Kenyan and Pakistani leaders. This paper begins with a description of the methodology used in

conducting each study. Thereafter, it presents the similarities and differences in experiences between the women leaders, and furthermore looks at the implications of these findings in the light of the relationship between women in educational leadership, and their effect on the quality of leadership offered in educational institutions. It also takes a look at how these are likely to impact on the general quality of education in both countries.

## **Methodology**

The study on the Pakistan women educational leaders was a narrative inquiry based on several individual interviews with four research participants.

A narrative approach was felt to be best suited to find out how the women have experienced and continue to experience gender related issues in their positions of leadership. In addition to the formal interviews, I was in constant dialogue with the participants to ask further questions or to clarify issues that arose out of the interviews.

At the time of the study, the women were either on or had completed leadership and Management Professional Development Programmes at the Higher Education Institute where I teach. All the women were married and had been in leadership positions between 3 to 16 years and ranged in age between 28 – 48 years.

The Kenyan study, which remains ongoing, has employed the use of a life history approach as well as some ethnographic methods such as observations and document analysis. It has engaged 12 participants, though this paper presents findings from the first phase of the study, which looked at how the personal and professional experiences of the 6 women leader impacted on their leadership practices. These women have been in school leadership ranging from 1.5 to 16 years and ranged in age from 38 – 54 years.

In this paper, gender has been used as the dominating factor of analysis to frame the women's experiences. Findings of both studies are presented along with relevant data to highlight ways in which gender has been and still is configured within the lives of all the women educational leaders despite of their leadership positions.

# Findings

## Similarities

### Subtle or overt push into teaching

With the exception of one participant in Pakistan and two in Kenya, all the participants had not gone into teaching because they wanted to, but because they were either overtly or subtly pushed into it. For instance, Nusrat chose teaching because she thought,

Being in Pakistan, teaching is the safest profession for a mother who wants to go to school with her children and come back with them. We used to finish at 12:00 pm. I used to come home, do my cooking and before my husband came at 2:00 pm my house was neat and clean, all cooking was done.

Shafia, who wanted to work for a corporate organisation, was discouraged by her father because of the hours she would have to stay at work. Instead, he persuaded her to take up teaching because teaching as a profession in Pakistan is more appropriate for women because it's not full time. "If you go to any school, it runs from 8:00 to 2:00, or 8:00 to 1:30 and then you can just go [home]."

Valerie, one of the Kenyan head-teachers, had this to say about her entry into teaching,

The missionary school where I was at had proposed that I go for nursing abroad, but my father refused. He thought that if somebody goes abroad, she won't come back. So, he suggested that I go for teaching. My father insisted but I feared teaching. I didn't like teaching...

Jennifer, another Kenyan headteacher, said,

I went to Kenyatta College for a diploma in education. I didn't get all the principles. I had only one principle and the rest were subsidiaries. So, I had to go for a diploma in education. That was not my line. I did not want to go into education. My first line was to do Law...

## **Men crucial to the women's inclusion and success at work**

All the participants attributed their career progress, their acceptance at their places of work and in the general society, to men. For example, Sultana attributes her rise to leadership to the school's male head-teacher and also to a male consultant who was working with the education board that managed the school she taught in. In addition, she talked of a supportive husband who would have said 'no this is enough but it was him who said yes, I should continue my education.'

Jennifer, a Kenyan head of school, shared that her career rise could largely be attributed to a former Permanent Secretary in the Education Ministry, who had met her while she was a teacher and who had believed that she was destined for greater things in education.

When he later visited the first school where I was a head, he was able to get the school money to put up more classrooms and staff houses. When I began to have problems with the then Provincial Director of Education (a woman), he ensured that I would be able to continue working without being harassed.

Zeituni, another Kenyan head, identified her former male head teacher as her mentor and one who had given her several opportunities while she was a teacher to exhibit her leadership skills. He was also the one who recommended her for promotion as a head teacher.

## **Scepticism about women's leadership capability**

The women spoke of constant reminders that they get both from their colleagues and the wider community about their place as women. They talked about how they continually had to prove themselves at their places of work. For example, Nusrat thinks that being a leader is challenging. She points out 'I think it's not that easy to be a principal and a woman at that. To prove to be a principal you have to work. You have to prove yourself. I don't find it easy.' Sultana too, finds being in a predominantly man's world a great challenge. 'Being a woman in the crowd; among men, seniors and juniors; it is difficult to show that what you are doing is worthwhile and being appreciated.' Zeenat too finds that she experiences resistance from the male parents she comes into contact with in school. For example, she said,

Some of the fathers are very rude and use abusive language with us [female teachers]. I think the reason is that they feel that the

person sitting opposite them is a woman and she is the weaker sex and they can say or do whatever they want and she'll be quiet because she is a woman. I think in our culture, it is difficult for some men to have a woman as a leader, to listen to her and accept her comments...

This view was also held by their Kenyan counterparts. They talked about being harassed and shouted at by male parents and one even talked of being mishandled by some of the officials of the School management committee, who seemed to feel that she was incapable of running the school without some help simply because she is a woman. 'The first time the chairman told me that, I was furious and I told him that the woman he meant was at home cooking and looking after the *shamba* (garden). Here, he was talking to a professional.'

### **Wives and mothers Vs men as workers in the outside world**

The idea that women are basically wives and mothers, and that men are workers in the outside world is something the women have to contend with daily. For example, Shafia pointed out that one of the things she finds difficult, being a leader and a woman, is that she cannot stay late in the office because there will be questions [from her in-laws]. This is something that does not happen to her husband. Because her money does not contribute to putting food on the table, she is often questioned if she is late at school; 'it's a different story because of course my husband is taking care of us with his money. As for me, I'm not actually giving it to the in-laws or not spending it on the home.'

These views rang true for their Kenyan counterparts too. As Valerie pointed out,

I find it very hard. I leave this place late. I have to be the last to leave as I cannot leave the girls [her students] on their own. Then when I get home, I get down to preparing the evening meal and supervising my son's homework. You know our men, they don't want food cooked by the maid, so I have to do it.

### **Choices about family relationships**

Being in positions of leadership has affected their relationships with their families. For example, for Sultana, the choice to become a leader in her field has quite often been at the expense of her family as she pointed out, 'Sometimes I would feel I was not doing justice to my children. That was the big challenge, I

think. Even Sundays, I would work. My children would suffer and my husband would be unhappy.'

For Zeenat, her decision to advance herself academically and consequently move to a higher level of leadership has meant additional work for her at home and all other quarters of her life. She pointed out,

I do get very frustrated at times with my husband and children because one of the disadvantages of being a working mother in Pakistan is that ultimately you are left with more responsibility than your husband ... I find it very difficult to cope with all these expectations.

One of the Kenyan heads, Mary, stated, 'My children have had to accept me and my work. They know I can't be there all the time. I try very much but sometimes the many things I have to do means I do not get home until late and sometimes I even spend weekends in school.'

Yet Jennifer shared,

It's like you want to progress but you just can't because of the children. One of the things that I know I gave up is my education, you know, to advance my career. You wish that there would be somebody in the house to help the children but it's like I am in school when I am in the house too. So, it's double work.

### **Impact of role models**

The participants felt that a female support system and the availability of female role leaders at the workplace are crucial for their success as leaders. As Sultana succinctly stated, 'If there were many women like me, we would be much stronger. I know they [men] would respect my ideas and there would be someone to support me morally, understand my issues.' Zeenat described the principal and owner of her school as one who 'stands by her principles. I think that is a very brave quality and I have learnt that from her.' While for Nusrat, her boss has served as a role model for her professionally as she says, 'whenever I look at her, I think she is a professional lady and this has influenced me.' She emphasizes this by saying, 'We need to work with each other. We cannot work alone. One woman cannot be strong but a group of women can be stronger.' Gladys, a Kenyan head-teacher, identified her congregation leader as a role model and had this to say, "I really admire her ... She's been encouraging me. She kept telling me, 'I know you can do it. You can make a good leader'..."

Valerie pointed out that one of her role models was a female college lecturer and as a result of what she observed, she would tell herself that 'if I plan and work hard, I'll be able to be like her.' In fact she points out that she was highly influenced by the female lecturers who taught her. In fact all the Kenyan head-teachers identified their teachers as being influential in helping them determine or fulfil their aspirations

### **Impact of leadership on self**

The women were quite emphatic about the fact that working and being in leadership positions gives them a sense of completeness; of being persons on their own right. Nusrat vividly captures this when she states that she enjoyed being a leader and a working woman because 'it's not the money I'm going for. It is for the self identity. It is a satisfaction that I get.' She went on to explain that it gave her a sense of identity because, "My husband was in the army and everywhere I would go people would refer to me as Mrs. Ashfaq. I wanted my own identity as Nusrat Ashfaq and now I'm proud to say that I have got my own visiting [business] card, my own car, everything is my own. The other day my husband said he was with a group of people and they asked him if he was Nusrat Ashfaq's husband? This is self identity for me. I have proven that I'm also a human being with my own identity."

For Shafia, her desire to work stemmed from her desire to utilise the knowledge she had gained from her studies, 'my husband was established so we didn't need that much money. There was no problem like that but I wanted to work. I had done my MBA so obviously I wanted to work.'

For these women, being happy meant wanting something more out of life than that which they felt was possessed by the other women in their society. It also meant doing the best they could with the opportunities they had been given, not only for themselves but also in terms of contributing to the world in which they and the people close to them lived.

Similar views were expressed by the Kenyan heads. One of them actually sees leadership as an opportunity to 'serve; being a servant to the children and teachers.' Quite a number of them were in agreement about the status they derived as a head teacher. As one of them pointed out, 'It feels good when I go to visit my mother. People seek my advice because I am a head-teacher and when I go to a gathering whether in church or something like a fundraising activity; it feels good to be called upon to address the people. the say that the head teacher is here. Let us see what she has for us today.'

## **Differences**

### **Dominant parent figure in participants' success**

In this study, while some of the women recognised that the support of both parents was important in their achievements, amongst the Pakistani leaders there appeared to be an unequivocal recognition of the dominant influence of their fathers in their lives, especially with regard to their career ascent. For example, Sultana states, "My father loved me very much. He would encourage me from the beginning and I got confidence from him. From the very beginning, he inculcated in me this love for education."

Similarly, Zeenat also points out that, " My father, he died three years ago, was obviously the greatest influence in my life. He was much focused and the best thing was that he thought that women were equal to men."

The opposite appears to be true in the case of the Kenyan heads. The dominant parent figure seems to be their mothers. For example, Valerie shared,

My mother had a huge impact on my life; a lot because of her encouragement. My mother really worked hard that we get a good education. She was ready to dig people's shambas to get money for this education. So, I used to tell myself that surely if this lady can work so hard, what of me? She was someone who did not want to see a child not going to school. She'd always wake us up very early in the morning ...

Jennifer, too, said, "My mother influenced my life a lot. She's a simple woman, very hardworking. I watched her as I grew up. I watched the way she would supplement my father's income as he was the sole bread winner. She was a hard worker and she has taught us to work hard."

### **Challenges to leadership by colleagues**

All the Pakistani women found that challenges to their leadership roles stem from the men they come into contact with. For example, Sultana found that her male colleagues were uncomfortable with her leadership position and as a result interfered with the execution of her duties. She stated, "I had no problem in dealing with women teachers but actually men did not want to see me in that position. I remember that one day I was conducting a workshop and the male teachers they just spoke and raised issues only for the sake of not letting me do

that workshop. They quarrelled with me and did not allow me to do it. If there was a man in my place, they would have allowed him [to conduct the workshop]. I was a women and so not important.”

Yet their Kenyan counterparts were of the opposite view. For example, Valerie had this to say,

I enjoy working with the male teachers because I have found that the men concentrate more on their work than the ladies. Women talk a lot and waste a lot of time. When it comes to discussion men are open. They'll say point blank, 'Madam, this is ABC...' But that is not so with the lady teachers... Another thing about ladies is that they like to be coaxed. When she knows how to do something then she wants you to beg and persuade her and that I find irritating.

Alice said, 'So far, from what I have seen in women's leadership, the ladies create obstacles. They would rather support male leaders. So, I don't know whether it is something that is in the ladies.'

### **Impact of cultural traditions**

In Pakistan, being a woman means acting and existing in certain ways. These ways are learnt early in life as they largely determine the level of acceptance and the place of a woman in the society. They shape the way the girls/women socialise in their families and in the larger community as females. This, sadly, has the potential to limit the capability of the girls/women to develop to their fullest promise. For example, Sultana said,

From the very beginning, my mother used to tell me that 'you are a girl and you have to live within certain limitations.' When I grew up, our society expected us to behave in a certain manner, like to wear a 'dupatta' [a piece of cloth used to cover the head and bosom] and when we walk, look down and not in front and not to be so bold and not to talk very much. I would speak much at home but when I grew up I would not talk much with my father and with my brothers; instead I would remain silent most of the time.

This was noticeably absent among the Kenyan heads. They claimed not to have experienced overt pressure to conform to traditionally acceptable behaviour either when growing up or when they became leaders. For some, they actually

broke expected traditional norms. For example, Valerie talked of having refused to get married early and bluntly told her suitor and father that she wanted to continue with her education.

### **Head-teacher Roles**

Teaching forms an important part of the head-teacher's roles in Kenya. Indeed all the Kenyan head-teachers told me that they had to teach, not only because it is a requirement by the ministry, but also because they had to be role models for the teachers they managed. All of the heads were unanimous in their agreement about teaching being the most enjoyable part of their work and their passion for teaching and caring for the children under their leadership rang out very strongly throughout our interviews. This, and some of things that I observed them doing in the school further showcased their desire for teaching. Though the Pakistani heads seemed passionate about their work, teaching as an important aspect of their work was not talked about at all in our discussions.

### **Impact of religion in leadership practices**

The place of religion in the women's lives is not an aspect that I set out to investigate. However, in my interviews with the Pakistani women, no mention was made of religion and its place in their lives or leadership practices at all. However, among the Kenyan head-teachers, religion and spirituality constantly cropped up in our discussions. Religion seemed to play a dominant role in their lives as well as in the way they related to their teachers and students, and this was something that both of the said seemed to pick on. I observed several prayer days in schools; some of the head teachers spoke of leadership being a God-given position and hence one needed to always focus on God when heading a school. Jennifer, in particular, had this to say about her leadership position,

I knew that it is God who took me there and it is God who is going to take me out. And when I went to the next school, it was the same thing. And even when I came to Matuga, it was the same thing. When I wanted to leave, I couldn't. So, I want to believe that even here, where I am I will leave at God's time. God is the centre of my being.

### **Implications**

The findings shared above have several implications for educational leadership as well as the kind of education offered in schools in Kenya and Pakistan.

The women's experiences illustrate to a large degree that gender roles are socially defined. However, the women participants show that these roles are not static, and can be challenged and redefined. The experiences of the women in this study seem to imply that as socially constructed beings, their choices were never wholly free; however, as individuals, regardless of the pressures set upon them, they resisted being individuals who were merely 'acted upon.' They were able to make choices, even if limited, and effect change. This therefore, seems to imply that schools can be sites where gender roles can be challenged and reshaped. While both the Pakistani and the Kenyan governments' have been making vigorous attempts to increase girls' access to education, this education can only be worthwhile if it is quality education that is being offered; and if it allowed both the girls and boys equal opportunities in developing themselves to their maximum potential. Also, if schools do not indicate to girls that the sky is the limit as they so often do with boys, it is inevitable that women will find it difficult to take up leadership positions. This seems to suggest that without explicitly addressing the underlying assumption of gender equality on one hand, through the overt and covert curriculum in schools, and by accepting the implicit cultural norms and values on the other, school leadership in Pakistan and Kenya may continue to bewilder and exclude women. With regard to the education of the wider school communities on gender equality, there seems to be an indication (from the data shared above) that in Pakistan men will have to be central in programmes that seek to develop this awareness. While in Kenya, though men might be part of this target, there is need to develop a sense of appreciation and confidence in women as a whole, to accept their fellow women in leadership roles, as well developing leadership skills within the women themselves.

As shared earlier, most of the participants went into teaching either because of pressure from their parents or because they had no choice. While their initial reasons for joining the teaching profession confirm the much offered view that teaching has traditionally been seen as an appropriate job for women; offering 'quasi-familial roles and identities around a core of male hierarchies and privileges' (Newman, 1994, p. 193) and that in Pakistan and to some degree in Kenya, it "is seen to be 'safe and suitable' through its compatibility with traditional norms and lifestyles," (Sales, 1999).

This not only raises questions about women's desire to get into leadership positions, which often require long hours at work but also raises questions about the quality of teaching offered by 'reluctant' teachers. It is often argued that teaching calls for passion, commitment and good training; core values that help distinguish professionals from any run of the mill 'quacks'. Whilst it is possible

for the 'reluctant' teachers to change their stance as the women participants in the study did, our schools would be much better off with willing teachers right from the commencement of their teaching practice. This is especially important given that all the Kenyan heads were unanimous on the part played by their teachers in fulfilling their aspirations.

While all the women participants demonstrate that they can succeed on male terms, a number of competing discourses coupled with the overall societal culture ensure that their work patterns in actuality replicate that of the average Pakistani or Kenyan woman. Yet, these women, who clearly are strong women, are not representative of the average Pakistani or Kenyan woman. All of them possessed an understanding of the societal forces that shape and determine their existences. Nonetheless, like any average married Pakistani or Kenyan woman, working or not, they take the major responsibility for the family and the home.

While this may not present a problem at the moment, it may do so if more women take on leadership roles. Women, who take on leadership roles in schools, may have to choose career over family since the nature of educational leadership as it currently stands is very demanding. Women may have difficulty reconciling both their roles as mothers and school leaders. Indeed, the married participants, both in Kenya and Pakistan, explicitly expressed their regrets and frustrations in trying to balance both aspects of their lives; while the single women, though they admitted that it was a challenging job, felt that they could cope. This is subtly unjust because leadership does not seem to present men with similar situations.

Whilst both the governments of Pakistan and Kenya are making concerted efforts to increase female participation in schools, such actions may be of no value to women if schools are not made more work friendly for females here by putting in place certain structures or practices. The Pakistani or Kenyan female head-teacher is not likely to discard her motherly responsibilities just because of her leadership responsibilities.

However, what is likely to happen is that her responsibilities both as a mother and a school leader may not be carried out effectively. Putting in place support structures, such as crèches where possible, and enacting school gender policies that take into account the needs of females seems to be the way to go.

Finally, all the participants in both studies were explicit about the need to have courses that would help them prepare themselves as leaders, as they often found themselves suddenly thrust into difficult jobs, or identified for their leadership skills that they didn't seem to be aware of.

However, a quick look at some of the in service courses offered to head-teachers, including those offered by our own institute, showcases one major shortcoming: enhancing the head-teachers' teaching skills.

My observations of some of these heads in the classroom revealed that though they were strong in their content and seemed to command their students' full attention, their teaching skills seemed limited. I particularly felt that not much was done in the area of using teaching methods that would move towards enabling the boys and the girls to develop their leadership skills, express their views and so on. If these head teachers are to be model teachers then this is an aspect that cannot be ignored.

## **Conclusion**

Although the findings from this study cannot be generalised to women in educational leadership in Pakistan and Kenya, the experience provide us with the lens to examine the power structure and the norms of the education systems in Pakistan and Kenya. The findings above demonstrate that there are unexamined conceptions and practices that marginalise or exclude women from leadership in education in both Pakistan and Kenya.

They also demand awareness of the circumstances within which women attempt to flourish as leaders. From the experiences shared by the women, this paper suggests that if leadership is to become inclusive, understanding what holds women back is paramount to overcoming these obstacles and improving their access to and participation in leadership.

On the whole, this study serves to remind us that it is not important whether a man or woman leads a school, but rather a recognition and legitimization of women in leadership in every sense of the word is what matters. Perhaps, it is now time in Pakistan and Kenya to accept a more encompassing view of leadership that is more accommodating of the perspectives and experiences of women.

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