

Schools, Leadership and Gender

A Study on Women School Leaders in Kerala Schools

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Abstract

With the advancement of professional prospects for women globally, top positions are now open and accessible to women across the professional arenas. School leadership is one such professional zone where women's participation as school leaders is emerging firmly as ever before. Since women contribute as a major and defining workforce in Indian schools as teachers (MHRD, 2018), it becomes apparent and reasonable to have more females as school leaders. However, process of this emergence of females as school face many challenges during their role transformations. They sustain the administration and management-related impediments and fight a distinct war of the patriarchal mindset that questions their calibre of delivering results.

The paper presents a case study from Kerala's field experience under the doctoral thesis. Using an in-depth interview schedule under qualitative research methodology, the cases portray the journey of two women leaders' in the schools situated in Trivandrum and Quillon, respectively. The study engages in a dialogue in women's leadership where the dynamics operate in a tight bureaucratic setup tinted with patriarchy shades. It questions the legitimacy of gendering the concept of school leadership and the implications drawn for the Indian school system.

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INTRODUCTION

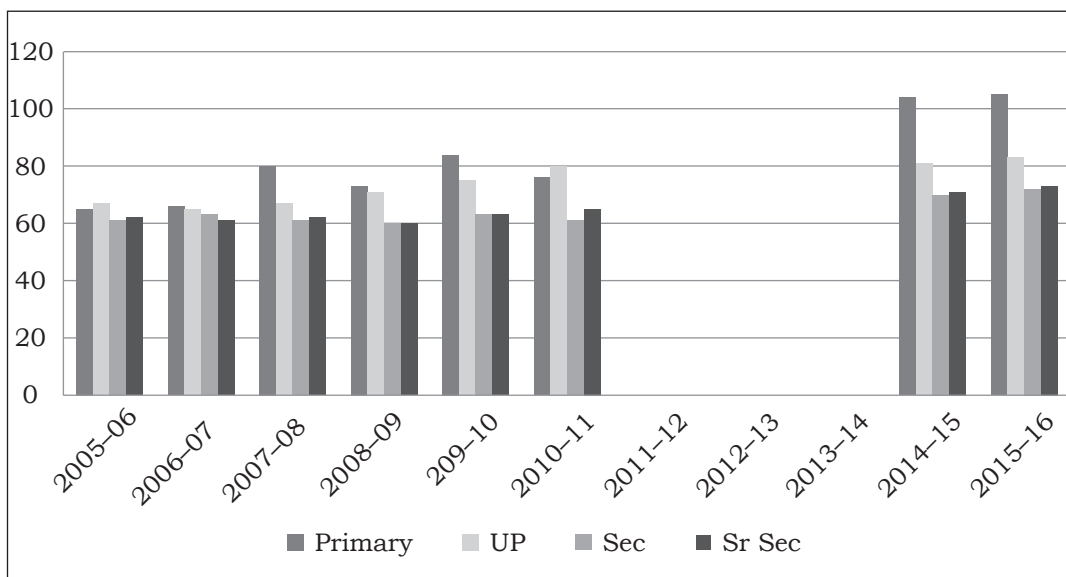
Gender discourse in school leadership has garnered considerable attention over recent decades (Schein, 2001). Women as centrally significant and sustainable forces for leading schools are seldom looked up at par with their male counterparts. As a result, female participation as school leaders in Indian schools lags behind. (Mythili, 2019).

As per the statistics released by the MHRD (2018), female participation in the education sector is highest at the primary education level. However, it persistently drops at the secondary and senior secondary levels of schooling (Fig. 1).

One of the primary reasons behind an increased intake of women at the lower levels of schooling is due

to the perception of caretaking and nurturance associated with them (Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004). The skewed rationality ensures and sustains gender inequalities at all levels. Nevertheless, as the gender states to declines, in significant change arises parity in the Secondary and Senior Secondary. Education levels.

Despite having more female representation in the Indian school education, ‘women as school leaders’ seldom get the chance to prove their mettle. The widening gap between an idea and its implementation corresponds to the hegemonic stereotyping of leadership under the male influence. It results in a contorted understanding of leadership values, nourishes the expectations, and feeds into the existing patriarchal



Source: (MHRD, 2018)

Fig. 1: Number of Female Teachers per Hundred Male Teachers

understanding of power and control. Male administrators configure their roles as leaders concerning the pre-conditioned masculinity ideas and are expected to fit in those moulds (Lata and Yadav, 2018). The reason corresponds to the social expectations in the private and the public sectors. India's socialisation essentially shapes the patriarchal mindset and is subsequently reinforced through inherently accepted norms (Gupta et al., 2008). Leadership, otherwise a gender-neutral realm, becomes a socially constructed process that is not instinctively inclined (Jenkins, 2018).

Gender, on the other hand, is 'performative,' a term coined by the famous feminist theorist Judith Butler (Butler, 1988). It refers to the processes involved in the construction of 'gender identity' by performing repetitive roles. Therefore, being a male or a female leader is not 'self-evident'. Viewing their subsequent leadership performance is thus not free from regulated notions of dominant patriarchal views. Therefore, the dichotomy of gender roles being typecast in educational leadership needs an extensive discourse. Unfortunately, the discourse on women's leadership is often used interchangeably with women's empowerment. It underrepresents their recognition as impactful leaders, disregarding them as 'career-seeking individuals,' having their strengths and capabilities (Mythili, 2019).

Research validates that men and women vary in leadership styles (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Dwiri and Okatan, 2019). The difference lies in the approach towards the concept of leadership where men perceive it as 'leading'; and women see it in terms of 'facilitating'. The concept of achievement varies too, as it is more concrete, structured, and extrinsic for men while it is subtle, qualitative, and intrinsic for women. The difference in leadership styles hence, aids in deriving a rationale for identifying the hidden gender biases and discrimination that the women administrators face while working in educational institutions (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Avgeri, 2015; Eklund et al., 2017; Lata and Yadav, 2018).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The paper presents a case study on women's educational leadership status in Kerala, India. The central idea of gender formation in the leadership scenario leads to the section that bifurcates the literature review into two major subheads: women's education in India and the subsequent leadership prospects and the women emancipation in Kerala's reformations society. First, the historical trajectory sketches the women's empowerment in the state under a transitional lens of modernity. The following section on the theoretical framework discusses standpoint theory related to women's leadership narrative and its

pertinence in studying women's leadership under that lens. Methodological underpinnings inform the study's approach and direct it towards the gender struggles and complexities in school leadership before weaving in the theoretical framework for discussion and implications.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women in Indian School Education

Women are undoubtedly under-represented in leadership positions across most school categories at pan India level. For example, only 35 per cent of academics are women in India, and even fewer show up in leadership positions (Lata and Yadav, 2018). A state-wise analysis reflects that Chandigarh, Goa, Meghalaya, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu have a higher representation of women school leaders in all leadership positions, namely, 'Acting Headmistress', 'Designated Headmistress', 'Vice Principal', and 'the Principal'. Further, despite a marked improvement in their leadership positions, males dominate leadership positions (Mythili, 2019, pp. 13–19).

Research studies show that more girls than boys drop out in India, resulting in a widening gender gap between primary and secondary, and tertiary education enrollment ratios. Women's participation in the labour market is not fairly represented. Since the 1950s, the proportion of women in low-literacy states has been unsatisfactory, constituting

21 and 23 per cent at the primary and elementary levels of schooling, respectively (Agrawal and Aggarwal, 1992). Another issue remains: if girls fail to complete their school education, they do not qualify the teacher training, which impedes their induction into teacher education and professional development (Rao, 2000; Sengupta and Guha, 2002). As girls progress on the educational ladder, their chances of discontinuing education, especially at the secondary and senior secondary levels increase (Mahalanabis and Acharya, 2021)

It is apparent that if women leaders encounter issues concerning handling power, exercising authority, and charting out strategic initiatives, it owes much to the marginalisation faced at the preceding education levels. The dilemma often extends to have confrontations and interface with gender matrices, where women leaders deal with male subordinates and challenge the power structures. Such confrontations are deeply rooted in socio-cultural contexts and require more profound engagement with the external environments (Mahalanabis and Acharya, 2021). The following section briefs the historical trajectory of women emancipation in Kerala.

Women Emancipation in Kerala

Several socio-religious reform movements from 1812 onwards decided the course of political development in Kerala. There was an awakening of the masses, especially women, as in the 18th century,

women in Kerala had to pay the *Mulakkaram* or the breast tax, just because they had breasts (Nair, 2022). Changes in Kerala's structure and practices in the past century have had wide-ranging implications for gender relations. The conventional indicators in understanding women's status assume a direct link between education and fertility. However, the hypothesis stands contested. Education alone does not enable women to challenge gender relations (Eapen and Kodoth, 2002). Much depends on engendering education to enable critical attitudes. Crucially domestic violence and dowry deaths went alongside rising levels of education in Kerala. It emphasised focusing on the social context, defined by iniquitous gender relations. Women became a subordinate group, both inside and outside the family, with very little power to make decisions (Kodoth, 2002). The missionaries' educational activities and the reformations brought in by Sree Narayana Guru and Sahodaran Ayyappan helped eradicate many evil customs and practices to develop a favourable attitude towards women's education and participation in society. The reforms considerably enhanced women's educational and social status in the society of Kerala in the first half of the 20th century (Dominic, 2016).

The historical transformation of the status of women in Kerala is undoubtedly an eye-opener. A state, which marks high rates of literacy

and the highest human development index (0.79) compared to the rest, too experienced turmoil when it came to recognising the significance of another half of the society (CDS, 2005; Kerala State Planning Board, 2019; PIB, 2021). However, with continued education, literacy, and poverty alleviation, Kerala carved a noticeable space amidst educational discourse. The following section backs the debate with a theory pertinent to understanding Kerala's women leaders' leadership styles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Standpoint theory, a term coined by the American feminist theorist Sandra Harding, is a feminist theoretical perspective that asserts that knowledge stems from a woman's social position. It negates the conventional thought process of science being 'objective'. It asserts that since women have been marginalised oversages, their voices, thinking patterns, and opinions have somewhat submerged in the society's material reality. The theoretical framework for the study provides a foundation to view school situations, impediments and challenges faced by the school leaders of Kerala and their initiatives to overcome them.

RATIONALE

School leadership cannot be undermined in ensuring school improvement (Klein and Schwanenberg, 2020; Pechota and Scott, 2020; Sharma, 2016; Sillins,

2016; Sinay and Ryan, 2016). Moreover, there is an unprecedented need to have a contextualised understanding of situational challenges and issues that school leaders face and the practices taken up to overcome them (Grin et al., 2018; Moir, 2017; Osborn et al., 2002). Indeed, the ways of handling the situations differ across the gender binaries (Avgeri, 2015; Eklund et al., 2017; Lata and Yadav, 2018; Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004).

Hence, the study derives its rationale from exploring the nature of leadership challenges and the subsequent solutions offered by the women leaders to usher in school improvement in Kerala, which is known for acing universal school education at the primary level, having HDI at par with the developed nations and a robust school administration to facilitate learning across the schools (Anupama and Sreekala, 2020; CDS, 2005; Kerala State Planning Board, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

The paper discusses two case studies within a qualitative framework to understand women's leadership experiences in two schools in Kerala, India. The schools comprise State-run as well as CBSE governed schools. The method adopted is that of a case study. An in-depth interview schedule was administered to identify the complexities arising in relationships with colleagues and

students, and determine the success of the school leaders.

Research Questions

- (a) What kind of issues are faced by women school leaders in Kerala schools?
- (b) How do they overcome those issues?

School Profiles

Case 1: Government Higher Secondary School, Jagathy, Thiruvananthapuram

It is a government Higher Secondary School located in Thiruvananthapuram's Jagathy area. It caters to the students suffering from auditory impairment. After a rich service of 33 years, the principal Jeannie (name changed) neared superannuation and recollected her struggles through a vivid narrative. An interpreter in the annual meet for the All-Kerala Deaf Association, she is an active member in numerous clubs for people with auditory impairment. The conversation took her back to the years when she had simply started as a sociology teacher. She transitioned through multifarious roles and responsibilities, starting from a teacher to becoming a social worker, where she reached out to the students' families coming from marginalised sections of society. Her leadership experience rested on individual efforts rather than on any fallacious support over the years. The leader focussed on making the students employable at all levels besides their academic scores to become independent, even when

there was a limited scope. Further, after school hours, she approached public schools to collaborate with NSS students and convince them to initiate a programme regarding language development for her special needs students. She not only focused on the collaborative aspect and skill development but also ensured that her students got a fair opportunity to interact with the external environment.

The leader realised the systemic limitations but kept a steady approach to make working in the school sustainable for the students and teachers alike. Here, being a woman, she traversed on a guardian and a professional's lines, which marked the next level of camaraderie between the students and the teachers. She faced the resource crunch, issues with the grant disbursement from a centralised system and even more, there was lack of trained professionals to handle student-related issues, however, with a much more positive outlook, she overcame the challenge by taking the lead from the front and carving out sustainable solutions in the long run.

A significant shared instance accounted for her overcoming a significant roadblock in the path of her leadership success. She returned to the school as a leader after six years of a legal battle against her colleagues. Being a female teacher, she faced biases, impediments, judgments, and marginalisation from the authorities, especially from the male colleagues. She admitted that she was framed in a legal case

by the school authorities but she pursued the case religiously with her family's and students' support. They kept her courage, optimism, and faith in the law undeterred. Nevertheless, the repercussions were borne heavily. In their bid to suppress her voice, she faced much public criticism, and her name got tarnished before she was transferred to another school. However, after six years of an enduring journey, her victorious acquittal changed the scene of her professional tenure. She was honoured by the Directorate of Education by giving her charge of the same school as a leader.

On her ladder of success, she met the same people who had charged the case against her and ensured that she suffered endlessly. However, she chose to bury the past episode for good and encouraged them to start afresh. The school observed a surge in the development and infrastructure and improved students' attendance post her appointment from case study:

'I was just a higher secondary teacher while I was transferred, but I came back as the principal to this school. I am extremely happy to be back. Although I feel the pain, I have some colleagues working with me back then in school even now. To be more specific, one among them was there in the conspiracy. I don't behave differently, keeping that in mind. Whatever happened in the past should be buried in the past itself. I do not feel good about digging that up.

The pressure posed on women leaders is multi-directional. With rising pressure and bare minimum support, the expectations remain the same. As a result, women leaders have to work harder to reach higher job levels. The phenomenon is referred to as the 'glass cliff effect', wherein a double standard defines the status quo (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). While women leaders remain more tactful in handling the job, they are rarely spared the flak and criticism of their male colleagues. In the present case, the principal had to bear all the prejudices and manoeuvre her successful leadership path. She led the school under excessive vigilance from her male colleagues, higher authorities, and even the community.

Case 2: Sree Buddha Central School, Karunagapally, Kollam, Kerala

The school is a co-educational, composite school having Classes from I to XII. The leader was from a CBSE school in Quillon district with a strength of 3000+ students. The school is a composite co-ed school, having classes from primary to senior secondary and attracting a holistic student clientele across the barriers of class, creed, and religion. The principal, Manjula (name changed), having spent 26 years in the teaching profession, took pride in association with the school as a principal for five years, wherein she started her professional journey as a teacher and eventually became the principal against all odds. Besides carrying out

administrative responsibilities, she engages with student discussions and takes up senior secondary classes for teaching. Excerpts:

'... before coming here, I was working in another school. I was a Vice Principal there and many of the teachers weren't happy with me. I was pretty strict in all my work so naturally, they had discomfort and disliked me. They all accused me that my certificate has no value. Many teachers did not appreciate me for having a B.Ed. Degree through correspondence. That was my challenge to take the degree and stand before them. I went for that (regular B.Ed. degree), and there was an entrance exam for the admission, and I got 4th rank in the entrance exam and I joined a prestigious teacher training college ... No, there wasn't any pressure from them only from certain teachers that I took the challenge.'

In the last decade, before her superannuation, she chose to pursue another B.Ed. Degree in a regular mode to eradicate the misconceptions about her inabilities and forged certification. However, the episode did make her doubt her self-worth and question her credibility. Even when she earned the same degree in regular mode, all her efforts pointed towards proving her worth and identity. Despite undergoing all the discomfiture, she braced herself for future challenges. In the present school, she faced hardships in managing teachers and convincing parents to shift from the conventional thinking patterns of pursuing science

education to that of humanities. Having double Master Degree in Botany and History, respectively, Manjula taught History using 'Yoga method'. She continued to develop students' interest in Humanities. Excerpts from case study:

'See, the main problem is with the parents, they want their children to come up to their level and for that, they are pressurising the students to do a specific branch. The reason for the hunger is if the marks are there, they are good. They don't allow the children to think differently and approach any other branch the children desire. I want to change the students' mind. I see a lot of teachers in Science but hardly anyone in Humanities, so I am still sticking on to that. I use different types of techniques as they will lose interest after one point. Right now, I am using Yoga method to teach History. I am pretty much aware of the student's calibre; they may not be interested in Physics or Maths even then they have to learn the professional course and if they gets a supplementary exam then also the blame will be on them.'

However, her initiatives of bettering students' futures went unnoticed as she faced criticism from everyone but gathered significant student support. When she was questioned about her leadership credentials, her engagement with the students gave her new hope. Next, she concentrated on her teachers and started building rapport by instilling leadership qualities. She subtly conveyed to

them the essence of empathy and ownership by generating autonomy in their decision-making. Excerpts from case study:

'When I joined the school four years back, I was not much aware of how the teachers are and what all are their capabilities. In the first year I divided the job for all the departments in the school, from this I came to a conclusion how to understand a person based on their merits and demerits and how much they are lagging behind and how much they are innovative in their ways. Then I approached the teachers for feedback.'

Manjula's transition into the school was subtle and slow, but she admitted that students had been the last to judge and evaluate her. She also undertook teacher training to develop her teachers for future leadership experiences so that they do not undergo what she had undergone. She inducted new teachers through monthly staff meetings and systematically followed her B.Ed. lessons of teacher training. In all, she kept it basic and uncomplicated. Hence, in commenting on school improvement, she had clarity about its conceptualisation. Excerpts:

'The first and the foremost important priority in school improvement is the students' discipline. It is not based on what military professionals do. It is said to respect others, behave decently, dress well mannered, and do whatever is considered to be a model in front of the world. If the

school lacks any of the attributes which I mentioned before then the impact will be felt directly, like if the school lacked discipline, then the parents don't feel like admitting them to the school, and apparently, if the teaching is not good, again the parents will be reluctant in sending their wards to school.'

She emphasised the need to promote academic merit and linguistic competence in English. Seeing her stay back for meetings, plan schedules and work, other teachers were encouraged to plan and volunteer for co-curricular tasks and work together in dealing with problem areas that students face. She explained her leadership style as basic. Excerpts from case study: 'My leadership style is very simple, as I told you earlier, I am pretty much humble, I don't do things over my pride. I don't even interact to increase with the subordinate at the lowest level and treat everyone equal. I believe that on a humanitarian basis we all are the same, only our position varies.'

Despite belonging to different school setups, structures, and districts, Manjula, like Jeannie, faced criticism and doubt to prove her mettle and manoeuvre through her leadership journey. Yet, whenever they were accused, doubted, and questioned for their worth, they surrendered to their faith, persevered through responsibilities, and overcame impediments.

FINDINGS

Women leaders in India traverse across the barriers of normativity, sexuality, and categorically defined gendered spaces in professional spheres. Leadership positions, therefore, guarantee meaning generation through conflict. The opportunities are sparse, and the structures are complex. Therefore, the distinctive character of women leaders in India leads to a new genre in leadership research where the traditional approach replaces conventionality, and the progressive mindset replaces the modern. The key results of the study can be summed up based on the research questions as follows:

(a) What kinds of issues are faced by women school leaders?

There is a significant resource crunch in the schools, especially with an inclusive setup, infrastructure, relevant equipment for the auditory impaired students, trained professionals to facilitate teaching-learning, and a good skill acquisition programme. The leaders face a tough time in managing these and facilitating student learning while experiencing a lot of prejudice, bias, and judgmental attitude while working with male colleagues. Their ego issues act as impediments and thwart their progress in carving out their own identity. They barely get any guidance and stand at crossroads when they have to ensure everyone's participation. Even though leaders

have a support system, performance pressure lingers over them continuously. There is a constant struggle to have everyone in the school work together and work as a team. In addition, the gender identity of the leader presupposes the path to her success as they have to work harder and deliver twice as much as is expected from them.

(b) How do they overcome those issues?

The women leaders focused on collaborating with local schools in the vicinity to engage more training and infrastructural support. Each step in the career path acted as a milestone, and they ensured that they negotiated with all the stakeholders equally including NGOs which brought them much knowledge and direction to drive towards leadership goals sustainably. They showed flexibility in decision-making and student dealing. With effective teacher management strategies, they strengthened their schools' culture. Through persistent sustained communication and persevering on tangible results, both women leaders balanced the gender binaries and minimised ego clashes. Further, they mobilised teachers to make fundamental changes in their teaching styles and pedagogical approach to prepare and gain the necessary capabilities for moving in new directions and reaching higher ideal performance peaks.

DISCUSSION

Standpoint theory helped the researcher develop an epistemological aspect of philosophy as it situates the *loci* via women leaders' experiences embedded in their narratives. Knowledge became socially situated, arising from an individual's social position and subsequently reinforced. The purpose behind selecting the standpoint theory for the theoretical framework was twofold. Firstly, it strengthened the subdued voices of the women there experiencing problems in learning, and who were career growth. It deconstructs the stated conventions of everyday experiences and offers an alternate reality and meaning to the same practices. Secondly, analysing the case study under the stated theoretical lens opens the insider-outsider position in a professional setup. It helps in understanding the power relations more suitably. The dominant practices have led to create a space that is blind to their credit. It, therefore, assures a robust understanding of leadership practices that are relevantly empowering besides being contextual (Gurung, 2020).

As both the leaders neared their retirement, maturity dawned upon them. They reflected how a considerable shift in their perception of the situations and teachers had also turned metamorphic. The confidence reflected their self-assuredness, complacency, and soft skills built over time, with age

and experience against the youth's hyperactivity. Hence, in both case profiles, women leaders interpreted and defined their legitimacy within the system as they learned to lead and received acknowledgment from the community, higher authorities, and subordinates alike (Mythili, 2019, pp. 179–181).

IMPLICATIONS

1. *Ensuring collaborative leadership practices in the policy*

The schools need an open forum to engage the teachers and principals in a dialogue catering to the contemporary challenges. Collaborative leadership induces a strong school culture and brings greater job satisfaction (Teasley, 2017).

2. *Active leader participation in school improvement*

The findings complement that leadership impacts student achievement and overall culture of the school (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood and Massey, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2015; Shatzer et al., 2014). Principals and teachers create an environment that impacts people at all levels to make sense of state standards, tests, and other student development measures.

3. *Need for context-specific training*

Although government initiatives such as National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers' Holistic

Advancement 'NISHTHA' and NEP 2020 focus on the importance of context-based development and training programmes, there is a need to carve context-specific diagnosis for the situational challenges.

4. *States support for the preparation and professional development of women school stakeholders*

Although pressure on women school stakeholders increased over time, the professional development support extended to them is relatively new. NEP 2020 mandates robust CPD but the capacity building of women school professionals also needs attention (GoI, 2020).

5. *Better administrative functioning is required*

State and district level policymakers need to engage more strategically in determining how states can provide support to implement the locally defined policies for transparency and improvement.

CONCLUSION

The study directed the course of the narrative to the gender aspect in school education, particularly school leadership. The narratives highlighted the hardships faced by women teachers in their journey to becoming principals. Besides knowledge production, it ushered drastic changes in women leaders' voices in social science research and grooming women leaders within and beyond the schools.

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