

# Women in leadership roles

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This report examines the research on gender equity in educational leadership published since 1997 until 2010. Even though women attaining jobs in school leadership has increased, women still do not fill administrative positions in comparison to men. The majority of research related to women and leadership examines the barriers women face in entering or moving up in the leadership hierarchy. Looking at the differences and similarities in how men and women take on and exercise leadership roles, the authors of the articles suggest ideas based on biological, psychological and sociological theories that stress gender difference.

The article, “ Re-thinking educational leadership: exploring the impact of cultural and belief systems” written by Shah, discusses how education and educational leadership theories and practices are influenced by culture and belief systems; with a focus on gender in Muslim societies. The first priority of Muslim women was to look after their family; therefore, before taking on any professional responsibility they had to ensure that no decisions or actions brought shame to their family or extended families.

According to Shah, the Muslim women who participated in leadership positions often felt powerless because their decisions and actions were regularly scrutinized by men. The second article, “ Gender Differences Among New Recruits to School Administration: Cautionary Footnotes to an Optimistic Tale” written by Riehl and Byrd discusses the factors affecting leadership among men and women in elementary and secondary education. Even though the women were as highly educated as the men, the men often were given many more opportunities. Women were still seen as displaying nurturing characteristics in their leadership style.

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The article also discusses women's leadership aspirations to that of their male counterparts. The third article, "School leadership, sex and gender: welcome to difference" written by Kruger brings into light the biological differences in genetic make up of men and women. It discusses how different hormones and brain structure are the reasons for differences in behaviour and personality among men and women, which is considered a deciding factor in their leadership styles. Kruger also examines how the environment plays an important role in the realization of gender differences in leadership.

The last article, "Gender and educational Leadership in England: a comparison of secondary headteachers' views over time" written by Coleman discusses the expectations of women and men as principals in England in the 1990's and in 2004. The article focuses on women with regards to work and personal life. Coleman reports that women have larger roles at work and at home, whereas men generally concern themselves with work only. Notably, women were seen as inferior so they adopted male work ethics. The results of Coleman's studies are similar to those in other countries.

It was very interesting to review the articles I chose to better understand the ways that educational leadership is perceived with respect to gender in the education system. As I continued to review the research, I thought it was of importance to examine the differing leadership styles and barriers, along with the similarities women faced in both western and non-western cultures. Throughout this inquiry I will cite several reasons for the low proportion of

women as educational leaders. According to Shah, “ Men and women are conceptually divided into two separate worlds.

Home is defined as a woman’s legitimate ideological and physical space, while a man dominates the world outside the home” (p. 31). With the ever-changing society, Muslim women started exploring their options and took more of an active role outside the home. Interestingly, the women who attained positions of leadership worked in the women-only establishments. It was troublesome for a woman to work in a mixed gender environment because their educational decisions went through a male counterpart, regardless of their seniority.

Women still held strong beliefs and values with respect to education; similar to western cultures, but the notion of women in a male dominated hierarchy was still considered problematic. I strongly believe that family and home responsibilities are still more likely to affect the career paths of women than of men today as they pursue administrative positions. Riehl and Byrd also believe that gender plays a major factor in the career development process to the degree that men and women encounter different circumstances, act differently, and/or experience different outcomes.

The theoretical explanations that have emerged are as follows: women have not been socialized to aspire to administrative roles or to prepare for them, higher level jobs were designed to exclude women and school leadership is located in male dominance in society overall, not just educational (p. 46). I believe society as a whole is more accepting of these barriers now; however, these issues are still evident, but not as strong. Similar to today, women as

teachers and principals were more likely to be found at the elementary level and men at the secondary level.

While I do see many women teaching as previously mentioned, it was interesting to hear that men at their level receive more administrative practice, thus leading to senior administrative positions. Also, the amount of education one received didn't play a huge factor in the hiring process. According to Riel and Bryd even the objective factors such as "obtaining education or experience increased women's chances of becoming administrators, they did not bring women's chances to parity with men's" (p. 61). Kruger also examines gender differences but relates it to the biological sex differences in school leadership.

Women by nature have a more caring, nurturing personality and this influences their administrative styles in a male dominant society. Kruger found that: "women are stronger educational leaders than their male colleagues. They carry out more educational activities and spend more time on educational matters than men. Women are more focused on instruction and education, on the schoolgoals, they are higher on creating a positive culture and an orderly learning atmosphere, they have a stronger classroom orientation, they reward teachers more often and they create more professional development opportunities for teachers" (p. 62). It appears as though women are strong educational leaders; however, we have learned throughout this course that male and female styles tend to differ even when they occupy the same leadership role. Women, who already face enough resistance and obstacles in a male dominated field, find their leadership

styles are judged more harshly by men; however this is not the same for the men. According to Kruger, “ Women who display male leadership styles are more negatively judged compared with those who do not, but men with a female leadership style do not seem to be more negatively judged” (p. 164).

Despite these factors more women tend to work under male principals than they do women. The reason for this is perhaps do to personality conflicts they may have with the same sexes on ideas of what successful administration entails. Another deciding factor in this is that women tend to be more education rooted and become administrators because out of their desire to improve education, whereas men take on administer roles mainly for the salary. Coleman’s research states that the stereotypical leader is a white, heterosexual, middle class male; therefore, women are often viewed as outsiders in a position of leadership.

Coleman identifies various factors effecting women’s likelihood of becoming leaders such as “ discrimination, lack of confidence, hesitation in making career plans, stereotyped into ‘ caring’ pastoral roles that were then not seen as fitting them for leadership and there were multiple difficulties for women in combining a family and career” (p. 385). Women’s leadership styles were seen as passive and gentle, while men were stronger and more decisive. In 2004, only half of the women surveyed report experience in discrimination related to advancements due to the likelihood of being labeled a feminist (Coleman, p. 86). Surprisingly, the traditional male style leadership has given way to more feminine styles of leadership. Males have been seen as putting work first over family at all times, which has influenced

women to the point of minimizing maternity leave and foregoing their desire to be supportive figures to younger women. Throughout this course we have discussed various effective educational leadership practices. Leaders should be able to adapt their leadership styles according to the situation. Therefore, change is necessary if we want to move ahead in our respective field.

The passive, nurturing, education orientated and productive styles depicted by women in these articles are accepted today by both genders in leadership positions. Noteworthy, a strong dominant leader is not always effective or seen as an acceptable style. As a teacher, I often see different leadership styles and can conclude that men and women at times see things differently. In conclusion, the role of women in educational leadership positions continues to evolve; however, there still needs to be work done in order to ensure equality.

If one were to look at our current list of administrators in the school board they would notice that there is significant higher ratio of male to female administrators. The females are often placed in small, rural elementary schools or are the vice-principals of secondary schools. I truly believe women will always face barriers while trying to attain leadership positions; however, if we work together, take charge and voice our opinions things may change in the upcoming years.