
Gender Troubles in School Administration: A Study of the Issues Faced by Female Principals Serving in Rural Areas of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The women who render their services as principals in primary and secondary schools in rural Sri Lanka are facing many issues due to their gender. The rural environment of their work places intensifies the severity of the troubles they experience. This phenomenological study explores and exposes the problematic situations faced by female principals in primary and secondary schools in rural areas of Sri Lanka. The primary data were gathered from five female principals who are currently working in the aforementioned context using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used when analyzing the qualitative data gathered from the respondents. Sexism, androcentrism, hegemonic masculinity theory and role theory were the theoretical lenses utilized in data analysis. The research revealed that societal pressure, which is characterized by patriarchy, negative beliefs regarding the effectiveness of women's leadership, and socially constructed gender roles create conflict-ridden situations when women occupy the positions of principals, and the severity of these conflicts are intensified by the rural socio-cultural and economic conditions. Furthermore, the female principals in rural areas in Sri Lanka are oppressed due to the harshness and risks inherent in the rural environment, lack of human and physical resources in schools, and the complex nature of the educational administration.

Keywords: Gender, Female principals, Rural, Trouble/s, Women

1. Introduction

The principal is expected to collaboratively create a school-wide vision and realise that vision through successful completion (Helterbran & Reig, 2004). The position of principal is engaged in the leadership role of a school and he or she has to lead the teachers and students towards achieving educational goals and objectives by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes of the students and improving their achievement levels to meet the national standards

in education. The responsibility of an executive head of the school is enormous and therefore it has many challenges in terms of being able to manage not only instructional programmes but also teachers and students of the school to bring about positive change (Aja-Okorie, 2010). However, feminist studies often reveal that there is a gender related issue in school administration in both global North and South, where women are discriminated against or excluded when they are advancing and after advancement into school higher administrative positions (Smulyan, 2000; Marie & Jones, 2011). In Sri Lankan context, the position of principal in government primary and secondary schools is still heavily male dominated. According to the secondary educational statistics of Sri Lanka, women represent only 30% of the total positions of principals of government owned primary and secondary schools in Sri Lanka. When it comes to rural areas, female representation drops to 15%-20% (Ministry of Education, 2019). This statistical evidence indicates that when it comes to rural areas in Sri Lanka, gender segregation in school administrative positions becomes greater than in urban areas. Female representation in school administrative positions is less due to various causal factors such as gender, gender based segregation, gender stereotyping, and various other gender-related forms of discrimination (Oplatka & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006). Gender inequalities in school leadership are not a remnant of the past and they are not confined to the global North or the global South (Whitehead, Andretzke & Binali, 2018). Women continue to face barriers in educational administration everywhere. These barriers may arise in a woman's quest to provide effective leadership (Helterbran & Reig, 2004; p.15). On the other hand, the impassability of socio-economic barriers and lack of infrastructure in rural areas make the conditions worse for these women who are rendering their services in rural area. The geographical location of this research encompasses the rural areas of both dry and wet zones in Sri Lanka. The main economic activity of the people in rural villages in the dry zone is paddy farming and this is usually affected by drought and floods during different seasons of the year. Furthermore, they and their crops are often attacked by wild elephants. The villagers in the wet zone in Sri Lanka are primarily small tea and vegetable cultivators. Marx and Engels (1967) describe the term 'rural' as simply an economic construct from which a social and ideological superstructure rises. According to the Countryside Agency (2001b), few service outlets, higher service delivery costs, greater travel needs, few information points, small (economic) markets, weak infrastructure, small firm economy, land-based industries, needs not concentrated, different types of need, low institutional capacity, few sites for development, rural landscape quality and character, and countryside amenities and access are identified as rural characteristics. Here 'rural' is identified in the sense of physical characteristics which can be seen in the areas which are considered rural. Small scale organizations (such as small schools, small villages, small churches, small communities), isolated or separated from services and amenities (also safer by dislocation from urban settings), being a product of agriculture and its environmental activity, strong community feeling, friendlier than urban communities, more tightly knit, conservative and traditional values and a slower, less pressurized way of life are all

features of a rural setting (Atkin, 2003; p.511). Here, Atkin (2003) indicates both the physical and psychological characteristics which are apparent in the rural community. The local customs and traditions which are unique to a specific village community is also a significant element of rural societies. These cultural elements play a vital role when identifying the behavior of a rural community. When womanhood becomes the object of oppression and discrimination, rurality intensifies the already existing gender issues faced by women in rural areas of Sri Lanka.

The discussion above reveals the problematic situations that female principals experience. Nevertheless, the high percentages of male principals who work in the same environments do not face such experiences, or even if they do, the issues are not as complex or as severe as those faced by female principals. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to explore and expose the different problematic situations faced by primary and secondary school female principals working in rural schools in Sri Lanka.

1.1. Research Problem

What are the different problem situations/issues faced by primary and secondary school female principals working in rural schools in Sri Lanka?

2. Literature Review

Administrative professionals, including women themselves, would benefit from a more sophisticated understanding of the gender biases that still persist to keep women on the operational and cultural margins of school organizations (Hoff, Menar & Tuell, 2006). Women's rights and leadership authority to power are grossly undermined and these situations are a result of the influence of some culturally and socially related factors and those factors help to perpetuate gender inequality in relationships. Society's attitude towards appropriate male and female roles is an obstacle that identifies women as not task-oriented enough, too dependent on feedback and evaluations of others, and lacking in independence (Grove & Montgomery, 2000). It is generally agreed that these are major reasons responsible for men's prejudices against women, particularly those in leadership positions (Aja-Okorie, 2010). Because of sexist stereotypes, women are expected to have characteristics like warmth, modesty, and sensitivity. These expectations have disadvantages for female managers, because they are inconsistent with the stereotype that people have of leaders, where leaders are supposed to be strong, result-oriented, and willing to take risks. As a result, women face prejudicial evaluations of their competence as managers (Eagly & Carli, 2003b). Although the general stereotype of a manager is masculine and although most people prefer a man as a manager, research reveals that female employees, employees with a female manager, and

employees working in an organization with a high percentage of female managers, have a stronger preference for the feminine characteristics of managers and even for female managers (Stoker, Van der Velde & Lammers, 2011).

Women's leadership style is different from men's but men can learn and adopt women's leadership styles and use it very effectively as well. Actually, women's management styles are not at all likely to be less effective; in fact, they are more effective within the context of team based, consensually driven organisational structures that are more prevalent in today's world. The assessment that a woman's leadership style is less effective than a man's is not fact based, but rather driven by socialisation to a perception that certainly persists (Appelbaum, Audet & Miller, 2003). The characteristics of transformational leadership relate to female values developed through socialization processes that include building relationships, communication, consensus building, power as influence, and working together for a common purpose (Shanmugam, Amaratunga & Haigh, 2005). According to Matheri, Cheloti and Maluwa (2015), there is a significant relationship between principals' gender and their effectiveness in management of discipline, and there was no significant relationship between principals' gender and their effectiveness in personnel management, student management and financial management. In that milieu, both the male and female principals are perceived as being highly effective. Women have some advantages in typical leadership styles but suffer with some disadvantages from prejudicial evaluations of their competence as leaders, especially in masculine organizational contexts (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Women also face difficulties inherent in school administrations. These are, lack of female role models, the notion that women cannot discipline older, male students, resentment of males working for females, some educators preferring male principals, difficulty in relocating, long working hours, and the differences in female leadership styles (Helterbran & Reig, 2004). A research work that studied the greater family responsibilities of women slowing their rise in organizational hierarchies, explored the effects of prejudice and discrimination against women as leaders and potential leaders, and examined the effects of the structure and culture of organizations (Kark & Eagly, 2010). Sexism often permeates the experience of female educational leadership in schools in rural areas due to instances of gender discrimination. These problematic experiences have been caused and intensified by sexism, including difficulties with executive staff, rumour and the establishment of credibility; difficulties which may have been exacerbated by the merit selection process (Dunshea, 1996).

The theories of sexism, androcentrism, hegemonic masculinity, and role theory emerged as suitable theoretical lenses with which to analyze the data. These theoretical lenses are discussed in the following section of the paper.

2.1. Sexism, Androcentrism and Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

These three theories can be considered to be feminist theories which typically argue and challenge the dominance of males over females in society. Sexism means discrimination based on sex or gender, or the belief that because men are superior to women, discrimination is justified (Napikoski, 2019). According to Napikoski (2019), sexism includes two main components. The first component is “sexist attitudes or ideology” which includes the beliefs, theories, and ideas that emphasise one group (usually men) as deservedly superior to the other (usually women), and it justifies the fact that the oppression happens for the other group on the basis of their sex or gender. The second component, “sexist practices and institutions,” represents the ways in which oppression is carried out. Oppression is not necessarily carried out with a conscious sexist attitude but may even be unconscious and compelling through a system which has been already placed in which one sex (usually women) has less power and goods in society. The recognition of sexism as an issue would enhance the extant literature on school principals by presenting a more accurate reflection of reality. At present, gender discrimination is viewed as an obstacle in the broad literature on women in educational administration, as it increases the pressure to perform and labels women principals as incapable (Dunshea, 1996). The view that women are inferior to men leads directly to the oppression of women who are occupied in positions as principals in rural schools in Sri Lanka by creating a perception that women are somehow less competent, less capable and not quite suitable for leadership positions. This oppression stems from the deeply held beliefs of the majority in society, and may serve to weaken the self-confidence and aspirations of these women.

Androcentrism also describes male dominance in society, and it is a complex and subtle form of sexism. According to Hibbs (2014), the term androcentrism refers to a male-centered worldview which does not necessarily present explicitly negative views of women and girls, but positions men and boys as representative of the human condition or experience and women and girls as diverging from the human condition. Furthermore, Hibbs (2014) states that androcentrism is an evaluation of individuals and cultures based on male perspectives, standards, and values. Androcentrism takes male values or practices as the norm, and then explains female values or practices as deviations from, or unsuccessful aspirations towards, male ways of doing things (Bothamley, 2002). Both theories of “sexism” and “androcentrism” elaborate the man’s supremacy over the woman, and posit that women are inferior to men based on different socially constructed viewpoints.

Hegemonic masculinity theory presented by Raewyn Connell provides a critical feminist analysis of historically specific masculinities, whilst at the same time acknowledging the varying degrees to which individual men play a role in its reproduction (Wedgwood, 2009).The

notion of hegemony provides a way of talking about overarching ideologies at the level of everyday, taken-for-granted ideas and practices performed ‘with consent’, and ‘without coercion’. The term hegemony has been used rather widely in recent years in debates on men, mainly as in ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Carrigan et al., 1985 cited in Hearn, 2004). Hegemonic masculinity advances the notion that to be considered a “real man,” a male must necessarily express certain traits including a high sex drive (men having multiple sexual encounters), authority, aggressiveness, strength, and competitiveness (Brenner, 2016).

2.2. Sex-Role Theory

Women’s sex-role perceptions and behaviour were studied from the perspective of role theory, with an emphasis on examining the situational nature of female sex roles and the degree of consensus among women concerning female sex roles (Yocke, 1978). People make the correspondent inference that women are communal, caring individuals. The origins of men’s and women’s social roles lie primarily in physical sex differences that have evolved in humans, specifically men’s size and strength and women’s reproductive activities of gestating and nursing children, all of which interact with a society’s circumstances and culture to make certain activities more efficiently performed by one sex or the other (Eagly and Wood, 2012). Under the sex role theory, Stockard and Johnson (1980) studied how babies assigned to the male category are encouraged to engage in masculine behaviors, offered boy-appropriate toys, are rewarded for playing with them, and punished for acting in girlish ways, while babies assigned to the female category are encouraged to engage in feminine behaviors while being limited to girl-appropriate toys such as dolls and easy bake ovens. The assignment of sex roles for men and women happens from their early socialization and this is called “sex role socialization theory” and refers to societal enforcement and encouragement of girls and boys to perform gender appropriate behaviors. Therefore, men and women learn, practice, and perform the roles assigned to them by their society and culture. They have, as it were, embraced and embodied their roles which are primarily socially defined and constructed.

This theoretical lens was incorporated when discussing how female principals in rural Sri Lanka grapple with different socio-cultural and institutional barriers based on their gender, a subject that has rarely been scrutinized in this field of research in the Sri Lankan context.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study is inspired by interpretivism which is typically associated with qualitative researching. The study generates subjective knowledge; in other words, it generates a constructed reality. The interpretivist view of the world is subjective, where individuals form their own reality in the world in different contexts through interactions with others, and every

individual perceives the world differently and views it in different contexts (Khan, 2014). Therefore, according to this view, the actions and behaviors of individuals are necessarily unpredictable. They are based on both the participants' and researcher's views on reality. The subjectivist view is that social phenomena, are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors (Saunders, 2009). The inductive approach is used in this study in which data is first collected and theorisation and theory development are done subsequent to the data analysis. A qualitative approach is followed in this study, a technique which is often used when exploring social or human problems. Qualitative research is based upon observations and interpretations of people's perceptions of different events, and it takes snapshots of these people's perceptions in a natural setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A qualitative approach to research is likely to be associated with an inductive approach in order to generate theory, often by using an interpretivist model which allows for the existence of multiple subjective perspectives and for constructing knowledge rather than seeking to find it in 'reality' (Greener, 2008). This study has incorporated the interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) as the research strategy to coincide with the nature of the research objectives. As a qualitative research approach, IPA allows for multiple individuals (participants) who experience similar events to tell their stories without any distortions and/or prosecution (Alase, 2017). IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of lived human experience. It aims at conducting this examination in a way which, as far as possible, enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the aim of 'interpretive phenomenology' referred to as 'hermeneutics' is to describe, understand and interpret participants' experiences (Tuohy, Cooney, Dovling, Murphy, and Sixmith, 2013). IPA research tends to work with either case studies or very small sample sizes (Gibson & Hugh-Jones, 2014). Though the sample size of this study is five which seems only a small number of cases, the researcher carried out in-depth analysis of each case since the IPA leads to the exploration of meanings and life events or experiences from the perspectives of the participants.

The purposive sampling method was used when selecting the five female principals who were administering rural, government owned primary and secondary schools in the Dimbulagala, Balangoda and Dehiattakandiya areas of Sri Lanka. Face to face semi-structured interviews were used when collecting primary data. 'Thematic analysis' was used as the data analysis technique. Thematic analysis is an approach where meanings and concepts are extracted from the data, and includes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Though some authors demarcate thematic analysis as a phenomenological method, it can also be used to emphasise the theoretical flexibility of thematic analysis, and can be used just as an analytic method, rather than a *methodology*, which most other qualitative approaches are (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In this study, thematic analysis is taken as the data analysis and interpretation method which is part of a phenomenological study. The researcher

ensured that all the ethical considerations were met and that nobody was unethically harmed or misused during the research process. In order to preserve the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher adopted a well-established research method in qualitative investigation, which was a review of multiple standard and credible literature sources. The research supervisor's careful scrutiny of the research process further ensured the trustworthiness of the study.

4. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method was followed when analyzing the interview data. In line with the nature of the research question and objectives, data collection method used and data generated, thematic analysis was considered to be the most appropriate technique to analyze the qualitative data gathered. The interview transcripts were perused and scrutinized very carefully to identify the codes. The coding was done manually, the data were summarized and the initial themes were identified. Then, the codes were connected and the main themes were identified in order to come up with the qualitative data analysis.

Participants

Malini is a female principal of a mixed primary school in a poor and remote village in the Dimbulagala zone. This is her first appointment as a principal and she works with only fifty students and five teachers. She has been the principal of her school for three years. *Sriyani* serves as the principal of a Maha Vidyalaya in the Balangoda zone of the Rathnapura district, and her school has students studying in grades one to thirteen. *Dammi* is a female principal who works in a mixed school in the Dehiattakandiya area in Ampara district. She has served more than four years in this school as principal. She has only one hundred and fifty students studying in grades one to eleven in her school, and only twelve teachers on her staff. *Leela* is another female principal working in a mixed school in the Dimbulagala zone. She has students from grade one to eleven studying at her school. She has served in this school for nearly five years. *Sumana* is a female principal working in another mixed secondary school in the Dehiattakandiya area. She is the principal of only one hundred and sixty students and twelve teachers.

4.1. The social resistance to a woman's leadership

Society has embraced the attitude that administration and leadership is a male prerogative. Community perceptions of educational leadership as a male domain are also often replicated by teachers and students (Whitehead, Andretzke & Binali, 2018; p.163). The patriarchal value system of society inspires that attitude and it indirectly creates a bugaboo of female leadership.

“When I was appointed as the principal of this school, there was a whisper spread among the parents of the students of this school that a woman cannot administer a school, can a woman take the responsibility of the future of our children?... So from the very beginning the parents were not loyal to me because I was the first women who had taken over the administration of this school” [Malini, a principal in the Dimbulagala zone].

The village community expects an authoritative masculine personality from a principal and considers the principal as the ultimate arbiter who is responsible for chastising male students who are bullies and thugs by way of very strict punishments. The village community believes that a woman does not have such ability. According to Hatton (1996), people of one community believed that a male, preferably a *large* male, is the most appropriate personality to be appointed as a principal because if a fight were to break out, it would be better to have a male around to handle the situation. There is a generally held belief that a woman principal cannot effectively deal with disciplinary matters, and society often affirms the view that women were incapable when in leadership positions, by questioning the capability of a woman with regard to disciplining boys (Dunshea, 1996). The leadership style of a woman is different from that of a man. Women tend to embrace relationships, sharing, and processes while men focus on task completion, achieving goals, and winning (Chliwniak, 1997). There is a popular myth in society that the leadership style of a woman is more inefficient than that of a man, and that it leads to lower performance. However, the assumption that women are “bad leaders” has largely been challenged by feminists arguing for the “no difference syndrome,” emphasizing that women were not less effective than men as managers (Aja-Okorie, 2010; 8). This is a male dominated world and the default leadership style comes from being part of a patriarchal society that is the norm, and when women do not adhere to that norm and assume leadership positions, they often feel that they have to become more ‘male’ in their leadership style to gain respect (Matheri, Cheloti & Mulwa, 2015). In reality, when a woman undertakes the responsibility of administering a school, the stakeholders become afraid that she will not perform well and that the diminished performance will affect their interests negatively. This type of attitude, stemming directly from societal beliefs, may constrain female principals and lead to frustration or lack of self-confidence.

When the principal of a school is a woman, some senior male teachers are left ‘rudderless’ due to the unavailability of a dominant male heading the ship. Male teachers’ gendered interpretations of their work in these environments both serve to re-inscribe and reinforce dominant constructions of masculinity and existing gendered relations of power, and central to these interpretations by these men attempt to distance themselves from femininity and unmanliness (Roulston & Mills, 2000; 234).

“Some senior male teachers do not like to receive instructions or orders from a woman. Sometimes they try to create problems at staff meetings. In this male dominated society, these men do not like to be controlled or administered by a woman. When I ask them to fulfil some requirements, they just ignore those requests. Sometimes they try to disobey the collectively accepted decisions and practices of the school. Once, a male principal had said that he does not bend in front of a woman. I do not want their respect, but they should accept me as the principal of this school, not as an ideal woman of this society” [Sriyani, a principal in the Balangoda zone].

The current situation in Sri Lanka is that the teaching career is feminised but the position of principal is dominated by men. Therefore, when a woman holds the position of principal, the male teachers feel uncomfortable being under a woman. Not only male teachers, but also some female teachers are not happy because they are used to work under a man from their early socialisation. It would seem that in terms of everyday perceptions, traditional masculine values are routinely privileged in assessments of what makes an effective leader (Hopfl & Matlal, 2007). According to Dunshea (1998), males are often patronizing to females and try to convince them how to do their job; in addition, teachers and others intentionally keep information from a female administrator with the purpose of making her appear less competent than a man. The social perception that women do not possess leadership traits are institutionally or structurally based, and have become instruments used by men to marginalize women leaders and quench their hopes and aspirations to succeed (Aja-Okorie, 2010; p.5). McGrath (1992) points out that, school staff members see female principals as less effective than their male counterparts. However, according to some researchers, women’s leadership style is different from men’s but men can learn and adopt women’s leadership style and can use it effectively as well (Appelbaum, Audet & Miller, 2003). The bottom line is that most males are not ready to accept the leadership of women and do not try to adopt the leadership style of a woman due to perceptions of male dominance prevailing in society. It is not surprising that many aspects of organizations implicitly favor men’s leadership because, traditionally, many men and very few women hold and have held leadership roles in most organizations (Kark & Eagly, 2010). This context is seen in Sri Lankan education system as well, where men hold most leadership positions. This ground reality facilitates the stereotypical belief that a man is more suitable for a leadership position than a woman, and creates many issues for female principals.

4.2. Womanhood and the lack of resources and facilities

Underdevelopment of infrastructure and lack of human resources is a common problem that most principals of both gender in rural Sri Lanka face. But that context is more adversely experienced by women than by men. In rural Sri Lanka, most principals perform a crucial duty

for and hold a heavy responsibility to uplift future generations of underprivileged students. Sometimes, their services are not limited to the duties and responsibilities assigned to their positions. They are often very dedicated people, and provide a great service to students in the name of humanity.

“I have to travel forty-two kilometres to the Zonal education office to collect the nutrition segments for the students. They allocate me a rice gunny. Our school development fund is very poor. Therefore, I do not have the ability to hire a vehicle and transport that rice gunny because it costs a considerable amount of money. I load it onto public a bus and bring it to school. Sometimes, I receive bad reactions from the bus drivers, conductors and passengers when I get into the bus with a rice gunny. Anyhow, I tolerate all these problems because I feel sorry for my students. Male principals do not experience this type of trouble to a great extent. I think in urban areas there aren't these kinds of problems”
[Malini, a principal in Dimbulagala zone].

Dimbulagala is a rural area in the dry zone of Sri Lanka. The environment is very harsh, and the people suffer from numerous socio-economic problems such as poverty, lack of potable water, natural disasters such as drought and floods, damage to their crops, poor infrastructure, and lack of facilities. Most children suffer from malnutrition. It is apparent that the authorities seem to be purposely side stepping the issues of rural communities while policy makers at all levels (national, provincial and local) are neglecting their duties and lack servant leadership (Dissanayake, 2016). Principals, therefore, have to share and bear all these problems with the villagers. As a relief measure to combat malnutrition, the government had started a program to provide breakfast to students in grade one to five studying in rural schools under harsh conditions. The principals have to collect the nutrition segments from the zonal education office. If the principal is a male, he can transport the nutrition segments (often a gunny of rice or other grain) in his motor cycle or other vehicle. However, most female principals cannot drive motor cycles; even those who drive scooter motor cycles are not able to drive when a load is piled on it. In such instances, the female principals face problems. In addition, principals need to take part in meetings and other programs in zonal, provincial and national educational offices and training centres. In these instances, also, female principals are hampered due to poor transportation facilities. Travelling long distances to fulfil official duties in the face of poor transportation facilities has become another problem that female principals serving in rural areas experience often.

The lack of teaching staff and lack of physical infrastructure like buildings, library facilities, desks and chairs is a source of stress for principals, and this directly affects the teaching-learning process. In particular, rural schools suffer from a shortage of teachers, especially in

subjects such as Science, Mathematics, and English, all of which are core subjects at the G.C.E Ordinary Level examination. Examinations Department statistics reveal that students from rural areas obtain lower averages than students from urban schools, and the poor performance of rural schools has been attributed to the shortage of teachers in Science, Mathematics, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and other key subjects (Weerakkody, 2013).

“Most students of these rural schools are weak in the curricular subjects. The main reason is lack of human resources and lack of physical facilities. Some teachers come and remain only a few months. They arrange their transfers and render their service to well-equipped, reputed schools. Rural principals are stressed under these circumstances. The ultimate damage happens to the students. But I cannot allow these students to fail the examinations. Last year, there were only six students out of twenty- six who were able to pass the G.C.E. Ordinary Level Examination. Most children are very weak in Mathematics. We didn’t have a mathematics teacher at school since the only Mathematics teacher of the school had taken her maternity leave. I met a male teacher who is teaching mathematics in a pirivena (school of Buddhist monks) near my school, and I asked him to support me to overcome this issue. He agreed to conduct an evening session for my students without taking a cent. He did the classes in the evening from 6.00pm to 10.00pm twice a week. I faced a big challenge. There was no problem with the male students; but, handing over female students to a male teacher at night is not accepted in this society. Therefore, I had to stay in school. Each and every teacher dedicated himself or herself and did evening and night classes for the students according to a time table. After the evening session, my students and I took our dinner and after a small break we started our studies again until midnight. My students are well-disciplined and dedicated. Some parents stayed at school and provided meals for the students. After the study session, the boys spent the night in the main hall with the school watchman and the female students and I spent the night on a mat in the library. My students do not go for tuition classes. Their parents do not have enough money to send them for tuition. But they gave their fullest support for these evening school sessions. As a result, 90% of students got through the O/L examination.” [Leela, a principal in the Dimbulagala zone]

The above participant had to go through a great deal of trouble due to the circumstances described above. The students were learning under harsh conditions and this female principal had to bear the burden of ensuring that all her students passed the Ordinary Level examination. Even with minimal resources, schools are required to make students perform well at

examinations. Lack of leadership to motivate the teachers and students would inevitably lead to poor performance (Matheri, Cheloti & Maluwa, 2015). If students are not performing well in examinations, much of the blame will accrue to the principal. It is ironical that those who blame the principal will be justified because of the popular social perception that women are less competent than men to assume leadership roles and achieve superior performance. In fact, however, schools administered by women, on the average, were superior in performance to those managed by men. The quality of pupils' learning and the professional performance of teachers appeared to be higher, on the average, in schools with female administrators (Porat, 1991 cited in Gowe & Montgomery, 2000). The matriarchal and feminine values may have facilitated healthy and peaceful environment at school and characteristics such as love, care, kindness, and mildness may have increased the motivation and self-confidence of the teachers and students. As per Leela's observation, since female students were unable to stay alone with a male teacher during evening and night classes due to social pressure, the lady principal volunteers to stay with students in the evenings and nights. Because the girls have to spend the night in school, the principal has to take the responsibility for their safety and well-being. Principals with the knowledge, attitudes, dedication, and stamina to assume the school's top job are the only individuals who stand a chance to survive, and indeed flourish, in a position that is dedicated to the service of educating and serving children (Helterbran & Reig, 2004; p.20). This is common to both male and female principals.

4.3. Uncertain policies and unsafe environmental conditions

The complex nature of the education management system is detrimental to female principals. The Sri Lankan public education system is bureaucratic and structured. There is hardly any flexibility, and administrative officers have to adhere strictly to the given procedures and circulars. On the other hand, planning and decision making has become inefficient in this system. Effective coordination between various arms of the educational system, pre-service training of all teachers, and decentralization of the professional development of teachers, principals, administrators and support staff are necessary for improving educational services (Sivasegaram, 2017).

“The education administrative system is somewhat messy. They do not have proper plans. Some days, in the morning, I receive a telephone call from the zonal education office asking me to participate in a meeting in the evening. Then I face an inconvenience because I have to go to the zonal office though I have plenty of previously planned tasks for the day. I also have to arrange transport to return at night because the meetings are very lengthy and most of the time they speak unnecessarily and waste the time. If the principal is a male, he gets on his motor bicycle and goes to the meeting. But a woman cannot do

this. This system is very haphazard. Sometimes they give us transfers to schools that are far away from us. It is more difficult for a woman than a man. They never think about the qualifications and the personal issues of the principals. There are only a few female teachers in this zone. They also are frustrated and disgusted” [Sumana, a principal in Dehiattakandiya zone].

With their positional power, the authorities in the top echelons of the educational administration take arbitrary decisions. Calling meetings in an ad-hoc manner makes these female principals stressed because they have a problem arranging their transport and also upsets the plans they have arranged for the day. The principal is required to attend administrative meetings and keep up with the best practices in education, and along with that, they have to ensure the smooth functioning of the school (Helterbran & Reig, 2004; p.13). When the administrative meetings become unnecessarily lengthy, female principals face the problem of travelling home at night. Rural principals traditionally work long hours because they are expected to attend a large number of school and community events, and the long hours needed to meet these responsibilities make the principal’s job seem unappealing (Howley, Pendarvis & Gibbs, 2002). Sometimes principals are transferred to schools which are far away from their homes. Some transfers of principals are the result of political interference. In rural areas, most local politicians exercise a huge amount of power and interfere with every public institution including schools. Social and cultural mores make women unfit to deal with these types of challenges. In addition, such political interferences affect the independent decision making of the principals negatively. When a principal receives a transfer to a remote area, if the principal is a woman, she is inconvenienced a great deal when travelling and also when attempting to balance family responsibilities and work.

“I have to travel fifteen kilometres from my home to this school. During the first days when I was appointed as the principal of this school, I did not have a clear understanding about the way to this school. I left from home at about 6.00 am in my scooter bicycle and I had to pass a bushy, wild area near the school. One day when I was passing this area, there was a wild elephant in front of me at only ten meters’ distance. I did not see it until I got close. I am not very familiar with driving a scooter... (laughing). I could not control my scooter and I could not turn it back. I just stopped and fortunately the elephant crossed the road and went into the forest. Nobody likes to work in such a risky area. But I accepted that challenge.” [Leela, a principal working in the Dimbulagala zone]

The conflict between wild elephants and villagers is a major issue in the rural dry zone areas of Sri Lanka. The fear of wild animal attacks has become a major concern in rural areas. A teacher

from the North Central Province mentioned that, “both students and teachers do not attend school when wild elephants are around” (Dulanjali, personal interview, March 03, 2015 cited in Weerakkody, 2013). Wild elephants roaming in rural villages not only aggravates the socioeconomic hardships that villagers have to face, but also have several adverse socioeconomic impacts which affect the health, education and other amenities of the rural population (Weeraratna, 2016). As discussed earlier, with the lack of transportation facilities these women have to travel to their work places at dawn and with the pre-dawn darkness and mist, sometimes the way is not clear. Wild elephants often wander throughout these un-cleared areas. The above narration by Leela, clearly demonstrates the risk and danger that is experienced by principals and teachers in rural areas. When the principal is a woman, she is clearly more vulnerable to be in danger than a man.

4.4. Gender-work segregation in the domestic and work context

The traditional Sri Lankan socio-cultural values are deeply rooted in rural areas and thus, a woman cannot escape from the duties and responsibilities that a conventionally ideal housewife would accomplish for her family. This phenomenon can also be related to the sex role theory which describes the social pressure that women face to accomplish the duties and responsibilities which are attached to the traditional roles rewarded by society.

“The balance between my career and family life is a huge challenge for me. The duties of the position of principal are not limited to 7.30am to 1.30 pm as it is for teachers. Even though I am the administrator of the school, I am a wife and a mother to my family. I have to cater to the requirements of my family members as well. Some days, I reach home only at about 12 midnight. Then my own children are sleeping. Next morning again I have to get up early and go to the school after doing all the housekeeping activities such as cooking, washing, cleaning the children and getting them ready to go to school. If I consider the male principals of my neighbouring schools, most of their wives are housewives. They give their fullest support to their husband to engage in his career by handling all the housekeeping activities and caring for the children because they are at home and not doing a job. But I am a principal and my husband is also doing a full time a job. Then my workload is doubled and tripled because I have the duties and responsibilities as a principal and, on the other hand, I have to handle the workload at home. There are some instances when the principal has to dedicate all twenty four hours of the day to fulfil the duties and responsibilities of the position. With family responsibilities, the position of principal is a huge challenge for a woman.” [Sumana, a principal in the Dehiattakandiya zone]

There are some traditional practices which do not approve when women engage in outdoor activities since women's roles are domesticated not permitting outdoor activities such as leadership positions (Aja-Okorie, 2010; p.9). Although a woman is engaged in a career, society expects her to accomplish the conventional duties and responsibilities in a family. Sumana also embraces the view that she must succeed in both roles, domestic and career, because she is a product of traditional society. A man is naturally considered to be the bread winner of the family. His traditional role is working and contributing economically to the upkeep of his family. Therefore, a man need not to bother about housekeeping activities such a cleaning, cooking, washing, and looking after the children. His traditional role is limited to that of head of the family and bread winner. But a woman who is engaged in a career has to accomplish all the housekeeping and child rearing activities as well as the duties and responsibilities of her job. According to sex role theory, women acquire a great deal of sex role learning early in their lives, and this can lead to an attitude of mind that creates conflicts later during their working lives (Appelbaum, Audet & Miller, 2003; p.46). Whether it is the global North or the global South, women's paid employment has not been counterbalanced by men assuming greater responsibility for unpaid domestic work (Whitehead, Andretzke & Binali, 2018; p.166). Women are engaged in unpaid work such as cooking, washing and caring at home while also engaging in paid work to further their careers. For women, one working day seems like a double day. In an urban community, it seems that the boundary between work and home is somewhat blurred. However, in rural communities, there is a belief that work pertaining to the family should be accomplished by the woman and outside earning should be done by the man. If the work is shared or if a man or a woman violates those social norms, society would frown on them. Roles that males are allowed to perform and females are forbidden from performing have cultural implications in the way they define the limitations in leadership functions for women. This is because culture is seen to be dynamic, and the degree of gender stereotyping within and across societies is on a continuum (Aja-Okorie, 2010). In modern times, even though women have reached the head seat of the school office, they cannot still abandon the kitchen and the washing machine, even temporarily. The female principals serving in rural areas are experiencing the problem of balancing the duties and responsibilities they have in relation to their families and the administrative position at school. This tension leads to intrapersonal conflicts and stress.

On the other hand, at the work place, female principals in rural areas are again subjected to discrimination due to gender-work segregation. These women seem less competent in accomplishing socially defined masculine tasks because they have never practiced them in their lives. Since gender division of tasks had always existed from childhood, these women had never engaged in 'masculine' tasks at home, and when faced with them at work, they feel inadequate.

“A male principal is able to do some maintenance work in the school by himself, for example, he is able to climb a tree and cut a branch, can repair a wire short

in the electronic system, can fix a tap, or repair a wall. But we as female principals cannot do so, and then we have to find another person to do such relatively simple work. Urban and suburban schools have supporting staff to attend to such work, but in our rural schools we haven't. At those moments I feel that if I were a man, I would be able to do this better.” [Dammi, a principal in the Dehiattakandiya zone]

There is no support staff in schools in rural areas. Tasks such as fixing water taps, cutting branches of trees, and repairing walls are done by the school principals themselves. Sometimes, male teachers or students help them in these activities. But in Sri Lankan society, women are not skilled in such activities and they often cannot even supervise some male students to get the work done. In their socialisation process they were not supposed to handle these activities because such tasks were perceived to be masculine work. It is possible to discuss this phenomenon with reference to the “sex role theory”. From early childhood, women have never practiced or performed the aforementioned activities due to the socially constructed belief that those tasks should be performed by men. Therefore, a woman has to make an extra effort, under these circumstances, to find a male who is able to accomplish these small tasks. As sex role theory says, men and women are differently distributed into social roles because of their *physical sex differences* in which men are generally larger, faster, and have greater upper-body strength, and women gestate and nurse children. Given these physical differences, certain activities are more efficiently accomplished by one sex or the other, depending on a society's circumstances and culture (Eagly and Wood, 2012; p.459). These given roles are primarily attributed by society and culture, though many women embrace these roles and practice them without questioning in their daily lives.

4.5. Lack of male role models among the teaching staff

With the feminisation of pedagogical positions in the public sector primary and secondary education system in Sri Lanka, the lack of male role models among the teaching staff to develop the personality of the male student has become a prominent issue.

“My school is a mixed school. Students from grade six to thirteen study in my school and there are only thirty students in a class. In my school, The Arts section is the only section in the Advanced level class. However, I am worried that there is a lack of personality development of my male students as the boys are at an age where they need male role models to build their personalities. There are only six male teachers on my staff and of them, only two male teachers have good personalities. Sometimes, I wonder whether I am doing

enough to develop the personalities of my male students.” [Sriyani, a principal in the Balangoda zone]

According to her experience, Sriyani has a problem with regard to developing the personalities of her male students through male role models in school. As per Roulston and Mills (2000), boys are often alienated from school because of a lack of male role models in feminised areas of the school curriculum and in primary schools. In Sriyani’s case, the principal is a woman and the majority of the teaching staff are also women. The gender imbalance in pedagogical positions has raised concerns about the lack of male role models for boys in the teaching profession, with teaching being increasingly seen among youth as a woman’s profession rather than as one suitable for men (UNESCO, 2016). The finger pointing which accompanies this notion of the underachieving boy often identified single parent families with a female head, and the feminization of the teaching profession, as a causal factor of this underachievement. Central to this argument is the claim that boys are currently out of control because they are lacking suitable male role models (Roulston & Mills, 2000; 221-222). Roulston and Mills argue that the lack of male role models in schools is a reason for the underachievement of boys. They further argue that boys are under-controlled due to a lack of male role models to guide them. Also, this predominance of women in the teaching profession is considered to be a detrimental factor, because from their childhood, students stereotype this position as one that is suitable only for women. Therefore, the difficulty of building the personalities of their male students due to lack of male role models amongst the teaching staff has become a common problem that female principals, in both rural and urban schools, face.

5. Findings and Conclusion

A commonly held societal belief is that women are less capable or less competent in leadership positions and also female leadership leads to lower performance and greater inefficiencies. These beliefs constitute a social pressure for female principals who are working in rural areas in Sri Lanka. If they happen to make a mistake or show even the least degree of incompetence, society is ready to attribute it to their womanhood. Another challenge for rural female principals is dealing with troublesome male figures in authority. These aggressive males attempt to interfere unnecessarily in school affairs using their political power and male hegemony. In addition, some senior male teachers resent working under a female head. The theories of sexism, androcentrism, and hegemonic masculinity which describe the oppression of women in a male dominated society clearly explain these phenomena.

Female principals are also uncomfortable when they have to perform tasks within the school environment which are normally done by men. Also these women find it difficult to build the personalities of their male students due to the lack of male role models on the teaching staff.

The female principals of rural areas also have a problem balancing the duties and responsibilities of their families and the administrative position at school. Sometimes the duties and responsibilities of family and profession are mutually exclusive, and such situations lead to intrapersonal conflicts and stress. The sex role theory validates these findings since it points out that men and women often adhere to and perform socially assigned roles which are embraced from and embodied through the socialisation process.

Further, travelling long distances to fulfil official requirements in the face of poor transportation facilities has become another problem that female principals in rural areas experience. Harsh conditions, risks and dangers that are experienced by principals in rural areas, exemplified by wild elephant attacks, reveal that female principals are more vulnerable than their male counterparts. Lack of teaching staff and lack of physical infrastructure like buildings, library facilities, desks and chairs are also a source of stress for principals because these aspects of a school directly affect the teaching-learning process. The complicated (bureaucratic and structured) nature of the educational management system and the short-sighted decisions taken by educational authorities (sometimes under the influence of local politicians) often cause problems for female principals.

It can be concluded, then, that societal pressure, which is characterized by patriarchy, a negative attitude towards the performance of female leaders, and socially constructed gender roles adversely impacts women who are occupying positions as principals, and the rural socio-cultural and economic conditions intensify the severity of the effect. Furthermore, the harshness and risks attached to the rural environment, lack of human and physical resources and the complicated nature of the educational administrative system all combine to oppress women serving as principals in rural areas in Sri Lanka.

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