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## **School Leadership: The experiences of some women head teachers in Fiji**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the challenges women head teachers encounter in advancing to school leadership. This study utilized the phenomenological approach, a branch of qualitative methodologies. Data collection methods involved semi-structured in-depth interviews and a participatory learning and appraisal workshop. This study reveals that the pervasive entrenched culture of patriarchy operates in various ways such as androcentrism, gender and sex stereotypes, sex discrimination and old boy networks at different levels of school organization, management and leadership and causes impediments to women's advancement to school leadership. The study hopes to abate preconceived notions of women's underrepresentation in school leadership and subsequently engender strategies to eliminate inequity. It fills the void in the available literature on women teachers and school leadership in Fiji and the Pacific region with implications for further research.*

**KEYWORDS:** Women, school leadership, challenges, barriers, education, patriarchy, stereotypes, gender.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women are grossly underrepresented in school leadership and senior management positions across the globe. Like elsewhere, women's advancement to school leadership and senior management positions in Fiji and most Pacific Island countries is snail-paced. While the recent past years have seen a few women advancing to school leadership in Fiji, their presence is comparably scant. For instance, recent statistics from the Ministry of Education(MoE) reveal that between 2010 and 2012, there were only 23% female head teachers (Primary schools) in Fiji while the proportion of female school principals (secondary schools) ranged from 21% to 27%. However, women constituted 53% of the teaching workforce for the same period. Although the teaching profession in Fiji is feminized,

educational leadership opportunities are highly gendered. Representation of women in school management boards and managerialship also follow a similar pervasive trend. For instance, in both primary and secondary school management boards, women comprised between 1-9% of the total managerialship for the year 2006 (EFA MDA Report 2007).

Considering that gender parity is seemingly a contemporary and contentious issue, it is important to unearth the experiences of women teachers and document the challenges they encounter in advancing to leadership. Generally, a lot of misconceptions surround the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership in Fiji and elsewhere. Hence, it is important to understand what women experience and why they experience what they experience. This will perhaps evoke more empathy for the challenges women encounter in advancing to school leadership and hasten the institutionalization of gender equity mechanisms. Understanding and acknowledging the challenges women face is apparently a precursor to giving more space to women and paving a roadmap to achieving gender equity in educational leadership and management. The scarcity of research on women teachers further compels the need to study women in education/educational leadership in Fiji. This will foster a better sense of what we know and what we think we know about women's leadership opportunities and experiences. In addition, it will dispel the myths and misconceptions that generally surround the underrepresentation of women in school leadership in Fiji and elsewhere.

This paper provides an insight into the challenges some women head teachers in Fiji encountered. It emanates from the findings of a phenomenological study of nine head teachers conducted in two districts in Fiji. A phenomenological study advocates the study of direct experience and "attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of particular situation" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p.141). Data was triangulated by supplementary resources and a participatory learning and appraisal (PLA) workshop which included both genders. The study was underpinned by feminist theories. The underlying assumption of feminist theories begins with gender as a pervasive category for understanding human experiences. While the findings illuminate the challenges, they are not generalizable to all the women teachers or head teachers either in Fiji or elsewhere.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was underpinned by feminist theories. Feminist theories emerged in the 1960s and have represented the interests of women and women's unequal position in society (Weedon, 1987; Grant and Giddings, 2002; Cohen et al., 2007). The implicit aims of feminism are to contribute to ending women's subjugation. Hence, through feminist critique, the powers as well as the limits of gendered divisions are exposed. Feminists argue that because the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to the male norm, it poses certain barriers for women's advancement in both the labour market and public life. They posit that the analysis of women's experiences from the male theoretical standpoint furthers women's oppression. Feminist theories implicate the need for research to empower women as well as the need for collective, qualitative, reflective and introspective biographical research methods. It is increasingly gathering support because it is underpinned by principles which include research

to empower women and is committed to unearthing the core processes and recurrent characteristics of women's subjugation (Cohen et al., 2007).

## **THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The review of literature in this paper provides a conceptual understanding of the concept of patriarchy and how it operates within various cultures and contexts to marginalize women's representation and access to leadership positions. Patriarchy refers to the male domination and power relationships in which "women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men" (Weedon, 1987, p.2). The males control culture, religion, language and knowledge while ignoring or devaluing women's experiences and knowledge (Kariuki, 2006). The theory of patriarchy has a history within feminist thought and "it attempts to penetrate beneath the particular experiences and manifestations of women's oppression and to formulate some coherent theory of the basis of subordination which underlies them" (Beechey, 1979, p. 66). Increasingly, it is feminist theory that has drawn distinctions between the operation of patriarchy and the construction of the feminine. Feminists argue that patriarchy is the basis of women's oppression. Hence, patriarchy is used to analyze the underlying principles of women's oppression. Patriarchy manifests itself in all the spheres of life, from the family to the world of education, politics, culture and leisure. It is not a "single or a simple concept" (Beechey, 1979, p. 66) because it translates into a whole variety of different meanings. At the basic level, patriarchy implies that the male is supreme and almost anything and everything must conform to the culture of the males. At a deeper level, it implies that femaleness in and of itself represents subjugation; therefore women must silently bear it all and do whatever it takes to conform to the male culture. Hence, patriarchy affords men the superiority lens while concedes women to the lens of inferiority.

Although people have entered the twenty first century, patriarchy continues to dominate and influence societies. For instance, India, countries in the African continent and the Pacific Islands are entrenched in patriarchal practices (Lateef, 1990; Razvi & Roth, 2004; Varani-Norton, 2004; Kariuki, 2006; Jalal, 2007, as cited in Nicholl, 2008). Patriarchal societies reinforce male supremacy and female subordination. Like elsewhere, men in Fiji are also projected as the "protagonists, "the leaders, the ones who get to do things, and women are in the background" (Kedrayate and Schulz, 1996, p. 43). The entrenched assumptions among Fijian societies are that authority and decision making are men's prerogative (Varani-Norton, 2004; Jalal, 2007, as cited in Nicholl, 2008). These assumptions are grounded in the "unthinking belief that there is a 'natural order' male leadership and female subordination" (Coleman, 2002, p.79). Hence, women often adopt a back-seat image and remain in a subordinate position to men both at home and at work. Subsequently, this may impede their advancement at workplaces and to formal leadership. Women learn the concepts of submissiveness and subservience through the powerful and influential familial ideologies that demand and emphasize the need for female submission to male control, particularly among the Fijians of Indian descent (Lateef, 1990). In a similar vein, Varani-Norton (2004) asserts that Fijian women legitimize male leadership by harboring embedded feelings of not wanting to disturb tradition. Many women are inhibited by two concerns: "a desire not to lose their

time-honored role as conservators of the status quo and a fear of disrupting social harmony by challenging what they will see as men's proper role..." (p. 242).

In patriarchal societies, the male roles are centered on social and political activity. Men's social and political roles confer them with status and power which evidently becomes the male prerogative. Thus, patriarchy establishes and reinforces the stereotype of the "real man" (Court, 1997, p. 18). The real man apparently, cannot and should not engage in chores that are considered feminine or has been historically and traditionally done by women. It is assumed that a real man does not change nappies, he does not help with the laundry, he cannot take instructions from a woman and/or he does not become emotional and shed tears. Thus, men disassociate themselves from child rearing and domestic chores (Pacific, 2020). Conversely, male behaviors deviating from the stereotypical real man often imply emasculation (although it doesn't lead to) and as such men are subject to ridicule and even contempt amongst peers. Oakley (2000) argues that men in patriarchal societies feel challenged and "experience discomfort and unconscious fear of powerlessness" (p. 328) when women have authority over them. Coleman (2002) and Sperandio and Kagoda (2010) have also cited similar sentiments of resentment among men and some women. For some women, it is absolutely wrong and unacceptable for a woman to be at the helm of leadership. Hence, they adopt a resentful attitude towards them and attempt to instigate others. Paradoxically, the women (mostly elderly) in the family are culture-driven to transmit the superior status of men as a legacy from one generation to the next. From as early as a girl's infancy, the notion that men are superior begins to resound. This continues throughout adolescence until marriage which establishes and reinforces that legitimate authority lies with men (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010). In many instances, the older women legitimize male leadership and exercise authority on their behalf (Lateef, 1990; Varani-Norton, 2004) by exerting power and control over daughters-in-law and younger women in the family. In doing so, they reinforce male supremacy and protect the status quo of men. Patriarchy exemplifies the superiority of men. The notion that men are superior is problematic. This is because the ideologies of male supremacy and female subordination are reproduced at workplaces. Such taken-for-granted assumptions perpetuate the culture of silence, passivity and the fear of femaleness among women. Hence women, particularly from conservative backgrounds, may become unconsciously apprehensive of men and take a back-seat. Others may succumb to silence and subservience. It could be assumed that silence and subservience at workplaces reinforces the inferiority status of women. Consequently, women are subjected to unjust practices, inequalities and discrimination. The unjust and discriminatory practices are more pronounced in harsher patriarchal societies where men assume the ultimate authority and women are confined to subordination. Patriarchy acts as the underlying formidable barrier which subordinates the interests and aspirations of women and further pushes them into invisibility and immobility.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The discussion that follows is based on a path-breaking phenomenological study on the experiences of nine women head teachers in the western division of Fiji. The women have teaching experiences ranging from eighteen to thirty five years. All the women had been

recently appointed to their first formal leadership position during the study. They were catapulted into headship when the State

Services Decree on compulsory retirement came into effect on 30th April 2009. Most of them had upgraded their qualifications since graduating as primary school teachers. The findings of this study illuminated patriarchy as the underlying formidable barrier to the women teachers' advancement to school leadership. The male hegemony of educational leadership subordinates women's aspirations and manifests itself in various ways at the different levels of school organization, management and leadership. Hence, women encounter various forms of glass ceilings which impede advancement to school leadership. These include androcentrism, stereotyping, sex discrimination and old boys' networks. Patriarchy appears to manifest in all the challenges that women encounter both at home and the workplace. In doing so, it accords men superior status while relegating women as inferior. Patriarchal societies and familial ideologies have perpetuated the inferiority status and traditionally conditioned men as well as women into believing that subjugation is women's natural and unrelenting fate. Men are idolized as kings, chiefs and pati pameshwar hai, meaning the husband is God. Thus, male superiority and female subordination is reinforced and consolidated within families and societies of both the iTaukei (indigenous Fijians) and Fijians of Indian descent. The findings imply that most men are constantly gripped by the unconscious fear of powerlessness (Oakley, 2000) and ridicule (from men and some women) when women take up leadership. Consistent with Oakley (2000) and Coleman (2002), the recollections indicate that men in patriarchal societies feel challenged, experience discomfort and the unconscious fear of emasculation when women have authority over them. This could be because in many patriarchal societies men are the decision makers and authority is men's prerogative. As such, men may become defensive and patronizing in their efforts to maintain their status quo. They may even resent sharing power and collaborating with women, especially on leadership and management issues.

The findings also imply that the notion of the real man attitude (Court, 1997) is strongly prevalent among the male teachers, head teachers and the school management committee members. Like elsewhere, the findings of this study indicate that patriarchy perpetuates the real man attitude and the unconscious fear of emasculation among male teachers. Hence, women leaders are generally conceived as a threat to the status quo of males. Because males continue to legitimize authority (Court, 1997), taking instructions from women is considered unmanly. Hence, when women exercise authority men often become resentful, mete out the stony silent behaviour and resort to insubordination. It could be assumed that such negative attitudes and actions are the manifestations of their veiled efforts to sabotage women's leadership and devalue female knowledge and perspectives.

The recollections of the women head teachers also indicate that patriarchal cultures accord men certain privileges such as lobbying for leadership positions. Reportedly, most male teachers lobby for and collude with school managements for leadership positions. Ironically, when men engage in such practices, it is accepted and aptly justified. This is because the local cultures project men as protagonists and leaders. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that

because of this men are almost always given the leeway. Conversely, if women engaged in similar practices, they would be subjected to stern condemnation and character defamation.

Women teachers have also been marginalized because of the prevalence of androcentric practices. The exclusive privileging of male teachers into first line positions perpetuated sex discrimination and further reproduced androcentricity in school leadership. It eliminates opportunities for career positioning and political savvy (Oakley, 2000). In addition, androcentrism has been responsible for the negative gendered experiences (Coleman, 2002) such as the fluctuating levels of confidence and self-esteem among some women teachers. Androcentric behaviours have also ignored and devalued the potentials of women teachers and reinforced the stereotypical notion that males are better. Conversely, androcentrism has advantaged male teachers by carefully positioning them in the first line positions and catalyzed access to school leadership comparably at a much younger age. The findings imply that it takes women almost their entire teaching career to advance to school leadership. The women attributed their sluggish advancement to the blatant androcentric behaviors of school managements and male head teachers. This finding is consistent with previous research (Coleman, 2002; Shakeshaft et al., 2007) which illuminated that comparably it takes women longer to access leadership. Hence, this compels the need to review and clearly articulate the role of school managements in the appointment of head teachers. Traditional mindsets compounded with outdated policy and practices impede the advancement of women teachers to school leadership. The women reported of sex and gender based stereotypes which are entrenched in generally most school communities. The stereotypes perpetuate androcentric behaviours of the male stream school leaders and management committees. Subsequently, sex discrimination is perpetuated. The most pervasive sex stereotypes illuminated in this study were that males are better and that the right way was giving it to a male. In addition, it was found that leadership is perceived to be male in sex type and men generally ascribe negative stereotypes to women. Thus, they cause invisible barriers by stereotyping women as leadership deficient. It was also found that sex stereotypes influence and reinforce gender-based stereotypes. The most pervasive gender-based stereotype that imposed barriers to the women teachers' advancement to school leadership was the one who scours the pots cannot run a school. Reportedly, this was prevalent among the school management committee members who appeared to cling to the stereotypical traditional gender roles of women and perceived them unfit for school leadership. The analogy of scouring pots to justify the perceived women's poor leadership skills and unworthiness submits a shallow justification that projects women as unworthy of leadership. Because women have been traditionally socialized into domestic roles, it should not imply they have poor leadership skills.

The findings strongly suggest that direct, indirect and overt sex discrimination (Coleman, 2002) operates at various levels of recruitment and appointment to school leadership. Sexism in the selection of school leaders is rife among the patriarchal school management committees. This is because between equally qualified and experienced male and female candidates, the selection and the propensity for male teachers to advance to school leadership have been blatantly higher. Women teachers, on the other hand, are not even considered worthy of leading and thus are out rightly rejected for school leadership. Hence, sexist

attitudes and sexism in the selection and appointment of male teachers have caused formidable barriers to women teachers' advancement and has perpetuated their underrepresentation in school leadership.

For many women, indirect sex discrimination begins from the time they commence their teaching career. Women teachers are generally delegated classes in the lower primary. While females stereotypically possess greater nurturance skills (Lipman-Blumen, 1992; Fondas, 1997; Eagly & Carli, 2003), this should not be the justification for confining women teachers to the lower end of the primary school spectrum. Arguably, teacher training colleges prepare primary school teachers to implement the school curriculum irrespective of their gender. Therefore, such discriminatory practices can only be interpreted as attempts to inhibit women's opportunities to advance to higher echelons. This is because according to common practice, teachers (male in majority) in the upper primary are given more prominence and public acknowledgement. They mostly get groomed for the first and second line leadership positions which eventually lead to their appointments. Women have conspicuously remained confined to the lower primary for most of their teaching careers. Reportedly, this has also stunted many women's opportunities for advancement to school leadership. Furthermore, the findings indicate a strong prevalence of sexist attitudes among the male teachers and managers. It was reported that male teachers resorted to subtle forms of male insubordination and resentment. Some male teachers blatantly ignored women head teachers' authority by creating some problems every day. One could assume that by adopting sexist attitudes men not only attempt to dampen the morale and efforts of women but vent their anger and frustration at having to concede to the authority vested in women leaders. In addition, the women pinpointed that sexist attitudes and remarks are rife among the male hegemonic school management committees. For instance, the school managers often justified their rejection of female candidates by sexist remarks such as females won't be able to attend meetings at night and working with the males is easier. To reject women for school leadership on the basis of not being able to attend meetings at night is debatable. Arguably, the precedence of convening meetings late in the evenings denotes indirect discrimination against women teachers. In retrospect, women are constrained by culture, time, family obligations and mode of socialization. It also appears that some women are reluctant to attend meetings at night because of how it may be perceived by others, especially in conservative societies. Most women reportedly are consumed by the fear of character defamation. Generally, when a woman leaves home at night people attach other meanings. These include promiscuous character, illicit liaison with one of the committee or board members and/or the most common one, the spouse being kept under petticoat government. Such insinuations are particularly rife in the conservative societies (Hussain, 2012).

The women head teachers also reported of having to deal with the well-entrenched double standard behaviour and expectations. These compelled them into working twice as hard (Coleman, 2002) to prove their worth, speaking louder and fighting a little more for their rights to be heard (Nath, 2000; Coleman, 2002) and enduring hostility and negativity (Hill & Ragland, 1995; Kariuki, 2006)) when they become vocal. Conversely, the findings indicate that when professional women do not voice out, they become victims of their own passivity

and consequently suffer greater risks of marginalization. The findings further suggest that vocal women are often derogatively labelled as this woman talks too much. This is because it is considered culturally inappropriate and unfeminine for women to be vocal. Hence, vocal women are prone to encounter hostility and are usually shunned by men with traditional mindsets. Conversely, being vocal is considered a positive trait among men. This double standard behaviour is apparently problematic for women aspiring to advance to leadership.

Moreover, it was found that old boys' networks existed and operated to disadvantage women teachers. These informal social systems offer men the exclusive advantage of cultivating friendship and alliances. Hence, they provided men with collegial support, mentorship and influential contacts that paved the way for their career advancement. Women, on the other hand, were constrained by culture, time and familial obligations. In addition, the findings suggest that old boys' networks reinforce androcentric practices and often function as systems of obligations and reciprocity. The old boys' networks also acted as powerful gatekeepers for women teachers to advance to school leadership. In Fiji, the pervasive culture of old boys' network is often reinforced and maintained by yaqona drinking which was previously very popular at meetings, informal gatherings and school functions, particularly in rural schools. Reportedly, understandings had been bargained (Hill & Ragland, 1995) by some male teachers during drinking sessions which ultimately led to their promotion. One could only assume that pacts regarding potential leadership positions in schools have often been negotiated with management committees in advance through such alliances. Therefore, school management committees have unduly marginalized women teachers through these informal social systems.

It is essential to note that women are not usually privy to such forms of exclusive male social networking. This is because sitting around the tanoa with men is culturally inappropriate and unacceptable for women in Fiji (Tavola, 2000). Inarguably, this serves as a poignant reminder of the powerlessness of being a working woman in an androcentrically defined world. Women generally do not become members of other informal networks because men gather to suit their timing; women have family obligations. It is obvious that after a day's work, many men head for the usual yaqona sessions or other forms of socialization while women are left to attend to the family. Hence, participation in informal networks is particularly difficult for women with demanding family commitments (Rhode, 2003). For this reason, women lack time for social activities that could generate collegial support and influential contacts. Consequently, they fail to secure contacts that would possibly pave way for future advancement. On the other hand, the informal social systems afford men the exclusive advantage of cultivating friendship and alliances.

The discussion that follows will highlight some implications for future research.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The findings of this study prompt the need for larger-scale phenomenological studies/feminist research on women head teachers and principals around the country to extend the insights and further validate both the challenges and positive influences women teachers encounter in



advancing to school leadership. It would also be interesting to document the career trajectories of both the younger and older generation of women school leaders for comparative data. Further research could include comparative studies to identify commonalities and differences in the experiences and worldviews of women educational leaders from different ethnic groups, geographical locations and leadership contexts (secondary schools and higher education, school management committees and education boards). In addition, research is needed on women in the private sectors such as corporate, health and politics to provide a different backdrop for the experience of women leaders and managers. It will also be useful to conduct research that documents the perceptions of male educational leaders and recruiters at different echelons of leadership. This will provide an alternative worldview on the challenges women encounter as well as facilitating greater inclusivity and sensitivity to gender equity and related issues. Conversely, further studies could be conducted to examine the factors that influence and support women's advancement to school leadership at various levels. In addition, it would be appropriate to conduct studies to determine the factors that influence or negate women teachers' aspirations, confidence and self-esteem in schools. Specific studies are also needed to analyze the type and degree of spousal support women teachers receive in terms of advancing their careers. These could be further extended to investigate the spousal impact on and the rate of women's advancement to school leadership if their spouses belong to the teaching profession and/or are educational leaders. These investigations would further provide greater insights as well as induce the development of meaningful intervention strategies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study illuminated patriarchy as the underlying common thread which perpetuates barriers for women's advancement to school leadership. The male domination of educational leadership subordinates women's aspirations and manifests itself in various ways at different levels of the school organization, management and leadership. Hence, women encounter various forms of glass ceilings which impede their advancement to school leadership. These include androcentrism, stereotyping, sex discrimination and old boys' networks. The findings of this study are beneficial because it has illuminated certain long standing issues pertaining to and emerging from the female head teachers. It has also provided an important context for increasing our understanding of women school leaders and their experiences and understanding why they experience what they experience. It is further envisaged that the findings will abate the preconceived notions of women's underrepresentation in school leadership and possibly culminate in the legacy of significant breakthrough in gender policy and practice at both the national and regional education sectors. The findings also implicate the need for more feminist educational researches. This will empower women as well as promote collective, qualitative, reflective and introspective biographical research methods. Critical feminist research will be useful in contextualizing feminist research and ideologies and consequently enrich the barely visible local feminist knowledge bases. These would also be useful in informing and shaping future research developments and conceptualizations. Only then one could truly proclaim that educational leadership knowledge bases and researches are gender equitable.

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