

Exploring the Narratives of Female Educational Leaders in Bhutan

Karma Dema
University of New Brunswick

This research explores the narratives of female educational leaders in Bhutan through a narrative inquiry paradigm (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The examination of personal experiences of female education leaders in Bhutan is at the heart of this research. Fifteen female educational leaders from seven different districts in Bhutan were selected using snowball sampling recruitment. Five broad themes emerged from the data. In this paper, I discuss one theme that reveals the perceived status of Bhutanese female educational leaders in Bhutan. It is related to how gender is a paramount challenge for women in leadership positions.

Methodology

In light of my interest in exploring the narratives of female educational leaders in Bhutan, I adopted a narrative inquiry paradigm (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) as my research methodology. Fifteen female educational leaders with leadership experiences ranging from three to twenty-eight years from seven different districts in Bhutan were interviewed. The diversity of participants makes a huge contribution to the richness and significance of the study.

I exercised a one-on-one interview approach with a semi-structured method. Applying the transcription guidelines proposed by Creswell (2002), the interview data were transcribed verbatim. Certain phrases and words in the Bhutanese national language of Dzongkha were transcribed as said, in an attempt to preserve the original flavor and the essence of the phrase. The data were

analyzed thematically. The themes not only bring to light the challenges and opportunities of Bhutanese female educational leaders, but they also reveal how culture and policies fashioned by men impede women from realizing their educational leadership potential. In this paper, I discuss gender and its impact on female educational leadership.

Gender is the paramount challenge for women in educational leadership positions

The fact that we hear of support being provided to women in educational leadership roles in Bhutan suggest that Bhutanese society is starting to welcome women into leadership roles. The participants described the encouragement they receive. There are increased instances of officials entrusting capable female teachers with leadership positions. Yet, there are certain challenges and tensions Bhutanese women face in their administrative functions typically tied to their gender.

Participants explained that because they are women, their leadership competencies and maturity are constantly challenged; professionally, intellectually, emotionally and politically. Of fifteen participants, six principals highlighted management and administration issues in terms of size, resources, and program implementation as stumbling blocks in their leadership path. Nine principals revealed gender as the most challenging factor within the sphere of leadership. Participants disclosed that men subtly demonstrate an attitude of indifference towards women. Dechen shared how her male vice principal intentionally discounts her leadership contributions but acknowledges the input of other teachers in realizing the school goals. Ana lamented being born a woman. She candidly shared that most colleagues, many who were not as capable as her, had already assumed management roles and are in a better professional position. She wished she had been

born a male so that she could also avail of opportunities relished by men.

Anna woefully said:

When the decision is to be made, they would listen more to males since decision makers are males. To me, discriminating conduct, such as this, is an outcome of a culturally demeaning phrase associated with women; amsumaram gi gacheya meshe (women know nothing). Though I excelled in numerous fields and I have achieved a principalship position, however such derogatory remarks have constantly restrained me and generated the feeling of men as superior.

Pema passionately narrates that when she was placed as a senior District Education Officer (DEO) in one of the dzongkhags in Central Bhutan, it was challenging for people in the community to accept her as the DEO. Pema had to remind Lam Naten, the head of religious affairs in the district, that she is the DEO of the district, and not the wife of the DEO. She recounts that the situation turned out to be worst when people in the community started addressing her as “Sir” DEO. Community members are accustomed to dealing with men and declared that they never had female educational leaders and, therefore, had no familiarity of interacting with female figure as DEOs. It was an arduous process, to convince the people, particularly in the remote community, that women can be and already are leaders. Female leaders do exist, in easily visible numbers! Pema reminisces about her initial years of leadership when she had to act and think like men in order to fit in the 'male world.' She was the only female surrounded by all male principals at every meeting. Accounts such as these remind us that leadership has most often been seen as the realm of males and women have not and, in some cases, are still not welcome. This is

especially true in contexts like Bhutan, where it has never been common to see women in leadership roles, education or otherwise.

It is culturally appropriate for women to seek counsel and guidance from men. Women traditionally feel assured by the direction and the advice of men, as sound and valuable. Fathers, brothers, uncles and husbands are referred to in times of critical decision-making and their opinions are readily acknowledged. Usually, women enthusiastically cooperate with and respect the advice of males. This could be because of the conventional image of men as superior to women. Nevertheless, the scenario seems to be slightly reversed for women in leadership roles. While women lead and take charge of family welfare and household responsibilities, their voices and experiences are barely valued and included in the decision making processes within the professional setting of a school. To have their voices included, women are literally compelled to demonstrate their intellect, prove their potential and work two fold in comparison with men. Pema passionately said that whenever she presents her ideas in a meeting that is generally male-dominated, she always ensures that her views are valid, rational and justifiable. This forces her to be critical of her own views before they are presented to colleagues. Such deep deliberation places additional stress on her. Similarly, Tseyang stated that she had to deliberately be more assertive, to seek attention and to have her views acknowledged.

Participants disclosed impactful experiences that bothered them. These are experiences they were unable to share previously because of their apprehensions of being judged. Bhutanese society is extremely small and closely knit. In the interview, Palden expresses relief in the opportunity to honestly narrate her leadership experiences:

When I was first appointed to a leadership position, I must confess that I did not sense ready acceptance from my colleagues even from those who believed in my competence. I spent some agonizing time trying to understand if the approach I took was wrong or if it was something else. After much soul-searching and talking with a confidant it dawned on me that perhaps it was because I was a female. In one way, this was confirmed when one guy asked for transfer and another colleague indirectly confirmed my suspicion. When I was appointed as the officiating director, I believe there were speculations and while many thought I was the right person to officiate some senior guys were not really looking forward to that news. Sensing lack of collegiality and low morale I organized an informal sessions to build teams, trust, and to get to know each other well. And, well, I was not surprised to see those very people missing! I think my age and gender definitely played against me. But it was not so when I was just one of them. Whenever there was something to be done within a short time, people were more than willing to volunteer if I led that work! What does it say? I can only guess but do not have a definite answer.

It could be reasonable to surmise that Palden experienced discrimination because of her gender despite her excellent track record. Albeit, some women are brave enough to enter into a leadership domain that is typically reserved for men.

Family responsibilities at home are another intriguing factor impeding women's accession to leadership rank, as well as, stagnation in their career. Executing leadership roles and

responsibilities identical with men in the office space, and fulfilling cultural expectations of women at home are dual responsibilities that cause women leaders to burn out, quit or be stagnant in their leadership position.

Without any hesitation, Dechen unveiled her role as a mother and wife when she is at home:

As I walk in the house, I am no longer a principal. I leave my leadership position in the school. Since we dwell in a male dominated society, women do most of the household work. I become a mother and starts doing everything since I do not have a helper. I am glad at least my husband helps our children with their school work.

Amongst the participants, many principals and vice principals have been working as educational leaders for more than a decade in the same position while others have been hopping from one school to another. Few migrated into the management role quite late. The professional sacrifices women have endured reveal the priorities women have given to their husbands and families. Placing men's careers at the forefront and leaving their profession at the back ground have not only impeded women in attaining leadership roles but has also delayed them in realizing their potential.

The subordinate positions Bhutanese women have chosen endorses the perspective of "the denied self" (p.22), one of the four perspectives discussed by Lambert and Gardner (2009) wherein culturally expressed sex roles regulate much of what women believe about themselves, other girls and women. Within this perspective, their belief and values were dictated by parents, the churches or strong societal obligations. In general, Bhutanese society seems to be operating from a conventional stance. The notions that "compliance is a woman's virtue" (p.22) and

“desirable women are submissive and passive” (p.22) are protected. Many within Bhutanese society are reluctant to allow these ideals to dissipate. How can women break this mold and become less restricted by their gender? Once again, this situation summons changes in outlook, policy, and practice. As a woman who was born and brought up within Bhutanese society, I was repeatedly told that I should be, and need to be compliant, submissive, and must learn to display feminine etiquette. While conforming to submissiveness and compliance has been my biggest challenge, over the years, this disposition has shaped my worldview as a Bhutanese woman. My professional experiences outside Bhutan have not only changed my perspective, they have impacted my understanding of myself as a Bhutanese woman. I have begun to problematize the culture and the system I was raised in.

Conclusion

Issues relating to the theme of gender as the paramount challenge for female educational leaders were revealed to be common among some female educational leaders in Bhutan. According to the narratives of participants, it appears that leadership is perceived within a conventional framework, and women are viewed as less capable of assuming leadership positions. Women who are in leadership positions, their leadership skills and competencies are constantly challenged; professionally, intellectually, emotionally and politically. Such an arduous leadership road seems to discourage some women from taking up leadership roles. Participants in the study call for change in policy, practices and strategies to facilitate future women’s opportunities to enter educational leadership roles.

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Karma Dema is a PhD student in the education at the University of New Brunswick. Her research interests include female educational leaders, gender effects on leadership and feminism. Prior to coming to Canada to pursue her PhD, she worked as a school principal in Bhutan for eight years.

Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to kdema@umb.ca.