

Women Primary School Principals in Cyprus: Barriers and Facilitators to Progression

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Abstract: This paper examines the career progress of female principals in Cypriot primary schools in accessing leadership. It reports part of a mixed methods study focused on the extent to which women primary school principals in Cyprus face barriers during their accession and enactment, and what these are. The study was exploratory, and used both a survey and interviews. The data were collected sequentially, with the survey preceding the interviews. The findings show that family influences, stereotyping, previous educational experience, training seminars, Cypriot society and culture, lack of female role models, and discrimination were powerful influences on the career trajectory of these women primary school principals. These themes recur in several places, showing the pervasive nature of these influences on women principals in Cyprus. Many of these findings resonate with insights from previous research.

Keywords: female principals, Cyprus, career progression, primary schools

Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to examine the barriers that women school principals encounter in Cyprus primary schools during their accession to, and enactment of, leadership positions. In educational systems, women remained under-represented in leadership roles, even where the majority of the workforce is female (Lumby, Azaola, De Wet, A.M, Skervin, Walsh, and Williamson, 2010). As more women gradually entered leadership roles in Cyprus, which customarily have been filled mostly by men, there is a need to understand the experience of female leaders.

Gendered leadership in the Cyprus educational system

This paper focuses on the Greek Cypriot educational system, and not the separate Turkish part of Cyprus, because, since the conflict between the two communities in 1974, it is only possible to gain limited information on education there (EPASI, 2008). The educational system in Cyprus is highly centralized and controlled by the state. Only people who have at least 15 years experience in state primary schools may apply to become principals.

Gender has also been indicated as a factor influencing promotions to primary leadership positions in Cyprus (Nicolaidou & Georgiou, 2009; Polis, 2013). Although teaching continues to be a female-dominated profession, promotion statistics in

Cyprus pointed to the unequal allocation of headship posts between male and female candidates and note the under-representation of women in leadership posts (Nicolaidou & Georgiou, 2009; Polis, 2013). The discrimination against women in appointments to headship is apparent through a comparison between the number of female and male candidates and that of appointees. During the last cycle of promotions in 2013, female principals comprised 77 per cent of candidate principals but they only occupied 28 per cent of the available posts (Polis, 2013).

Aims and research questions

The aims of the research were to establish the influences on women principals' professional careers, the enablers and barriers to accessing the principalship, and the ways in which these barriers can be overcome. There were five research questions.

- 1) What aspects of a female's life can influence her leadership progress?
- 2) What are the barriers for women in seeking to access leadership roles?
- 3) How can these barriers to leadership positions be overcome?
- 4) What forms of support are significant in helping women to access leadership?
- 5) What types of training and development contribute to women's preparation for principalship?

Literature Review

Theoretical literature on barriers to accession

The literature on gender and leadership suggests that gender has a significant impact on women's access and entry into leadership positions (Coleman, 2005; Blackmore, Thomson & Barty, 2006). 'This is because women are still discriminated against and lack administrative preparation for the positions on the basis of their gender despite equal and to some extent preferential treatment policies put in place' (Moorosi, 2010:10).

Hadjipavlou (2003) notes that women in Cyprus have not been given space to articulate their accomplishments and have been given even fewer opportunities to help them to access leadership positions. For many years the systematic professional development of teachers and principals at all phases of their career has been neglected.

In most countries, women were expected to preserve traditional family roles alongside existing or new job responsibilities (Sanchez and Thornton, 2010). When women attain or seek positions as educational leaders, it is not easy to balance their work and family obligations (Coleman, 2001, 2005; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2008; Moreau, Osgood & Halsall, 2007; Wrushen & Sherman, 2008).

Shakeshaft (2002) recognizes that there were still a lot of women who reflect that parental responsibilities restrain them from performing their jobs as school principals, and that such responsibilities may make women reluctant candidates for leadership positions. Additionally, Coleman (2004) notes that the classification of women as sympathetic, domestic, and of lesser importance and status than males, influenced them.

Moorosi (2010:16) notes that 'social barriers in the form of broader cultural expectations in terms of the sex role stereotypes, political, traditional and historical influences are even more problematic because they are so deeply rooted in the society and in the institutional cultures and are therefore not easy to eradicate'. Women experience a glass ceiling arising from gender stereotypes and the difficulties of combining motherhood with a career (Coleman, 2011). Linked to the above, Cyprus has adopted an approach that leads to the appointment of highly experienced, and usually male, principals (Pashiardis and Ribbins, 2003).

Empirical literature on barriers to accession

Coleman's (2004) UK research, based on the orthodoxies relating to gender and leadership, signifies that women principals often mention some 'commonplace misunderstandings which are brushed aside by the women who mentioned them, but they still have to be regularly overcome and are indicative of the underlying assumption that the leader is male and that women as leaders are 'outsiders'' (Schmuck, 1996).

The causes of women's under-representation have been described as 'overt and covert barriers' (Coleman, 2001, 2009), or 'internal and external barriers' (Blackmore, 1989; Shakeshaft, 1989; Hall, 1996), to women's career development. The term 'glass ceiling' has internationally become the most representative metaphor comprising the whole range of inhibitors limiting women's accession to senior positions.

Wirth's (2001:16) research in Geneva shows that 'the gendered division of time between work and family is probably the most significant gender issue of all and explains many of the differences between the work patterns and job types of men and women'. A barrier that women might have faced in order to aspire to leadership is that 'motherhood takes priority over work and hampers women in balancing their work and family life. Women often have to make a choice between their career and children. Research in Greece shows that 'those who succeed despite this role conflict usually have other people looking after their families' (Kaparou & Bush, 2007:228).

Hadjipavlou's (2003) research in Cyprus states that women have not been given space to express their achievements and have been given even fewer resources to help them to aspire to leadership positions. One main reason is the structural

organization of Cypriot society, which could have been considered as patriarchal and gender specific. Linked to this, research in Ohio showed that women need to be assertive enough to aspire to leadership positions, and to apply for them when qualified to do so (Pirouznia, 2013).

Research in South Africa also identifies other barriers to women's promotion to leadership positions, including discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, lack of mentoring systems in the teaching profession, lack of support systems from family and colleagues, lack of networking, lack of female role models, and lack of support from colleagues and administrators (Chisholm, 2001; Chen et al. 2012: 240).

International research shows that women's efforts to become leaders can be even more difficult if there is a lack of support from partners/husbands and extended family (Young, 1992; Hall, 1996; Kaparou & Bush, 2007; Coleman, 2011). Additionally, women take career breaks to have a family, putting them in a disadvantageous position compared to their male colleagues and making them think twice before applying for leadership positions (Evetts, 1994; Thornton & Bricheno, 2000; Moreau et al., 2007; McLay, 2008; Coleman, 2009, 2011). As Coleman (2007:21) explains, 'the expectation that women will take maternity leave, rather than having a more extended career break, may not in itself have been helpful to women, as it has fuelled the expectation that women will take only short breaks for childbirth and childcare'.

Methodology and Methods

Mixed methods were used for this study as they facilitated a better understanding of the connections among variables and allowed an appropriate emphasis at different stages of the research process. Using a sequential mixed methods approach facilitated a better overall perspective (Morrison, 2007). A survey approach was used to obtain generalizable data about the phenomenon and semi-structured interviews to add greater depth and meaning on this complex issue.

Methods and sampling

The research of women principals in Cyprus primary schools was designed to provide a 'measure' of the career progress of female principals and to address the apparent under-representation of women in leadership positions. Individual responses were aggregated in order to give a summative measurement.

Surveys-questionnaires

Statistical data from the Ministry of Education in Cyprus were used in order to establish the number of women principals in Cyprus primary schools. An imperative

consideration in judging the trustworthiness of research is the size of the sample (McMillan, 1996). The total population of women principals in Cyprus primary schools 187 and the authors surveyed the whole population, a census, to facilitate generalization.

Questionnaires may include closed and open questions, where closed questions prescribe the range of responses from which the respondent may choose (Morrison, 2007). Both types of questioning were included in this research, since they offer different kinds of information and provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon. The questionnaires were distributed by using the Internet application, Survey Monkey. Fifty-three women principals (28.3%) completed the questionnaire fully, and twenty-three (12.3%) responded partially. The overall response rate was 40.6 per cent. The incomplete questionnaires varied in the number of questions answered. Those which answered only the biographical data (12) were omitted from the analysis while the remaining 11 were included, because they provide some substantive data. This is a modest but acceptable response rate, considering that this was a whole population survey, or census.

Interviews-case examples

Sampling for the interviews was based on self-selection, arising from a question included in the survey instrument. All 20 women principals who agreed to take part were interviewed. One of the advantages of having willing participants for interviews is that they are likely to provide a significant amount of data. These are not case studies as generally understood in the literature, because only the principals were interviewed, but they can be regarded as case examples.

Interviewing is one of the oldest and most widely used of social science research techniques (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were used, with prompts, to allow informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms while having sufficient structure to provide reliable, comparable, qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Using a recorder has the advantage that the interview report is more accurate than making notes (Opdenakker, 2006). All participants agreed that their interviews could be recorded. All twenty interviews were conducted at the principals' schools, with dates and times based on the respondents' availability.

Data analysis

A number of features of Survey Monkey were used to conduct the analysis. Survey Monkey exports gave a presentation-ready summary of the survey results by

question, known as question summaries. The data were aggregated using tables and figures. Statistical tests for difference were not conducted and analysis was based on the themes that emerged from the data.

The qualitative data were analysed manually, following four steps: reviewing the data, organizing the data, coding the data and interpreting the data. Patterns, categories and themes were coded and clustered to different groups in order to make comparisons. The last part of the analysis was interpretation that involved attaching meaning to the data. The interpretation of data was achieved by making a list of key themes.

The approach to data analysis links to Denscombe's (2003:119) point that 'analysis contributes to originality because the emphasis on 'why' has greater depth and contributes to the generation of knowledge as distinct from information.

Data triangulation was achieved through the comparison of qualitative data received from the semi-structured interviews of 20 women principals with the quantitative data from the 76 questionnaires. Reliability and validity issues were addressed carefully but these cannot be absolute in mixed methods research.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion are presented thematically and literature is used to inform the analysis.

Childhood and family background

The survey findings showed that a majority (28/53) of the respondents who responded to this question have female family members who are, or have been, principals. This suggests that family background is an important influence for many women principals. There were significant differences in relation to age, as more mature principals were less likely to have female family members in their families in the profession. The survey data show that a great majority (27/28) of respondents with female role models were highly experienced principals, with more than ten years' in post. The interview findings indicate that participants who mention female role models identify their mother (8), grandmother (4), aunts (3) or mother-in-law (one). However, ten said that they had no female role models.

Lumby et al. (2010) suggested that when there is equitable representation of women in leadership positions, this provides role models of female success, encouraging women to aspire to these positions. The data from this study collectively suggest that role models were important for the career aspirations of the principals. This implies that lack of female role models could be a barrier for those women aspiring to access leadership positions in schools. This supports Eliophotou and Christou's

(2012) research, also in Cyprus, which showed that feminisation of education does not appear to extend to leadership positions, and that this is most probably due to lack of role models.

Women principals were asked if they experienced the patriarchal family model during their childhood and, if yes, to explain how, if at all, this model influenced their decisions to seek promotion as a principal. The data confirm the findings of Coleman, Haiyan, and Yanping (1998) regarding underlying patriarchal values. The patriarchal family is a family model in which males are the primary authority figures and fathers hold authority over women and children. In the Cyprus context, patriarchy means the family model where the structure is hierarchical and the father is dominant.

The survey data show that a majority of the principals (30) who answered this question experienced the patriarchal family while the other 27 did not. Most (24) of the women who experienced the patriarchal family model were mature principals, aged over 45. Almost all of the younger principals did not report experiencing the patriarchal family model. Similarly, the survey data show that the more experienced professionals were more likely to mention this model, which was also more common in the traditional towns of Paphos, Larnaca and Famagusta than in more urban locations. Principals working in more traditional areas, notably Paphos and Larnaca, are more likely to regard the patriarchal family as a significant influence. Those ten women interview respondents who said that they did not have any female role models note that the patriarchal family model was the main reason for not having a female role model.

Quinn's (2014) research showed that there is a need for role models in the progression of potential female leaders and that fathers are important early role models. However, the majority (41/62) of survey respondents said 'no' to the question about whether the patriarchal family was an inhibitor for accessing leadership positions. Survey data showed the significance of age and experience for this issue. Almost all of those who regarded the patriarchal family as an inhibitor were experienced principals. Principals who led schools in bigger cities, such as Limassol or Nicosia, tended to suggest that the patriarchal family was not an inhibitor. Principals working in smaller cities, which have a more traditional culture, consider that the patriarchal family inhibited their decisions about accession.

The interview data showed that ten women respondents experienced the patriarchal family model. P11 said that 'the patriarchal model was a huge barrier for women to become what they wanted, apart from housewives and being responsible to raise their children'. Coleman (2004) noted that the identification of women as caring, domestic, and implicitly of lesser importance and status than men, impacts on the experience of women in positions of leadership. Another interviewee, P20, added that her decision to become a teacher was influenced by the patriarchal family model they were experiencing: '

There were lots of families experiencing the patriarchal family model and there was a lack of female role models. Women were responsible for the household and raising their children. Fathers were those taking the decisions. One of those decisions, influenced by my father, was to become a teacher'.

However, the patriarchal family model did not influence her decision to apply for the principal's position, as this was entirely her own decision after 27 years experience in education.

Forms of support for women leaders

The survey findings showed that a large majority (48/62) of respondents said that they have attended training seminars for school principals. The great majority (47/58) of the respondents agreed that such seminars were important for their career development. This view was supported by the interview respondents, one of whom (P5) said that training seminars can show principals how to adopt their own leadership style, how to react in certain situations, how to lead the school and how to discuss problems arising from the daily routine at school.

Another form of support was the family, and a large majority (53/58) of the survey respondents stated that family support was important or very important for their career development. Lumby et al. (2010) also noted that most principals with families viewed them as advantageous to their career progress. The interviews also showed how family can be a vital form of support, as noted by one principal (P19). 'They supported me from the beginning of my career until now'. Lumby et al (2010) also showed that many principals reported their family to be very supportive, giving encouragement and advice, and accompanying them to school or related functions.

Two interviewees mentioned the significance of networks. They commented that, due to their good networks with other principals, they knew how to deal with certain situations, even before they accessed the principalship. Moorosi (2010) claimed that the acquisition of qualifications, training and workshops, as well as participation in informal networks, played a crucial role in preparing women to acquire management positions.

Facilitators and barriers to women's career progression

The survey and interview findings showed that the seven factors facilitating women accessing leadership positions were the family background, the Cypriot culture, the Cypriot society, societal stereotypes, discrimination, their educational experience, and the leadership seminars they might have attended. The seven factors identified as facilitators also operated as barriers for many survey and interview respondents. These factors are discussed, and linked to the literature, below.

Family and friends as a facilitator

Lumby et al. (2010) noted that most principals with families viewed them as advantageous to their career progress. Almost all (52/58) of the survey principals stated that their family background was an important influence on their aspiration to leadership positions. Papanis (2014) also showed the importance of family activity in influencing the representation of women in different professions. Fourteen interviewees also named family as an influence. One of them (P16) said that,

‘Cypriot society doesn’t seem to facilitate a woman who wants to apply for a leadership position. Especially if the candidate is sensitive, and takes everything seriously, she won’t be able to cope with the conflicts and issues arising in her work environment’.

Nevertheless, on moving on to headship positions, further support is needed for women to perform the role (Theodosiou, 2015).

The great majority of respondents (53/54) stated that family background was an important facilitator for their decision to aspire to leadership positions, while only one person said that this was unimportant. Interview findings showed that the most frequently mentioned facilitator was that of family and friends. Almost all (17/20) of the women principals interviewed said that their family and friends were facilitating factors towards their career progression. According to Coronel et al. (2010), most women leaders who are married and have families embraced both their family and work roles.

Family and friends as a barrier

Tsangari and Stephanidi (2012:150) noted that women’s ‘decision to work has an impact on the institution of the family: on one hand, the home is still mainly dependent on the woman but, on the other hand, the Cypriot family structure is still characterised by patriarchy’. More than half of the respondents (43/58) stated that family background constituted a barrier to their career aspirations, while only twelve said that this was not a barrier. Older and more experienced educators and principals were more likely to perceive their family backgrounds as inhibitors to their career aspirations. Five interviewees also mentioned family as an inhibitor towards their career aspirations. Two of them said that they did not receive any support from their family. Another (P19) linked this issue to the patriarchal family and said that this was one of the factors which inhibited her career progress, and that most of the women of her age experienced this family model. Shakeshaft (2004) acknowledged that barriers to the entrance of women into leadership positions included patriarchal societal structures and the devaluation of women within societies. Lack of female role models in the family was another factor that was mentioned by interviewees as an inhibitor towards women career progress. More than half of the interviewees

(12/20) referred to the lack of role models as a reason for women to be under-represented in leadership positions.

Cypriot culture, society and stereotypes as a facilitator

Cypriot culture consists of the beliefs, behaviours, objects, and other characteristics common to the members of the society, and this culture helps members to conform to the society's shared values. Only a small proportion of respondents (8/58) stated that the Cypriot culture was an important facilitator in their decision to aspire to leadership positions, while the majority (30/58) stated that this factor was unimportant for them.

Shakeshaft (2004) acknowledged that barriers to the entrance of women into leadership positions included patriarchal societal structures and the devaluation of women within societies. As the Cypriot culture can still be considered to be male dominated, and patriarchy to be the social system in which a male is the family head and the primary authority, it is not surprising that most respondents agreed that the Cypriot culture did not facilitate their decision to access leadership positions. More than half of the survey respondents (30/58) stated that the Cypriot culture was an important or very important influence on their decision to aspire to leadership positions, while only twelve regarded this as unimportant. Significantly, older and more experienced principals were more likely to be influenced by these cultural factors. These data seemed to confirm the view of Jakobsh (2012) that gender roles are socially constructed classifications that are inspired and furthered by the overarching influence of patriarchy within society, communities, and families. The survey findings showed that most (80%) of the women who experienced the patriarchal family model are mature principals, aged over 45, suggesting that this may be less influential for younger principals. School area data provide a mixed picture. The patriarchal model was more common in the traditional rural towns of Paphos, Larnaca and Famagusta than in more urban locations. Interview data showed that half (ten) of the respondents experienced the patriarchal family model. Hadjipavlou (2003) states that, in traditional rural towns in Cyprus, women have not been given space to articulate their achievements and have been given even fewer resources to help them to aspire to leadership positions.

Lee's (2011) research showed that women principals' leadership experiences sometimes operate contrary to the traditional gendered stereotypes, and that trying to meet the cultural norms expected of them results in conflict and stress. Almost half of the survey respondents (27/58) stated that societal stereotypes were an important influence on their decision to aspire to leadership positions. Older and more experienced teachers and principals are much more likely to be influenced by such social stereotypes than younger and less experienced leaders. Coleman (2007)

noted that women tend to deny that there is a problem whilst at the same time they are able to give examples of their own or others' experiences of discrimination. Principals from two of the smaller and more conservative towns, Paphos and Larnaca, were also more likely to be subject to such influences. Only a very small proportion of survey respondents (6/58) stated that societal stereotypes were an important facilitator for their decision to aspire to leadership positions. This study confirmed Coleman's (2012) view that there is a stereotype that a principal is someone who is male, from the dominant ethnic group, of middle age and from a reasonably privileged background.

Cypriot culture, society and stereotypes as a barrier

While equity gains have been made, different expectations and attitudes towards women, based on culture, still exist. Studies indicated that these negative attitudes to women constitute the major barrier to female advancement in school leadership (Shakeshaft, 2007). More than half of survey respondents (30/57) stated that Cypriot culture constituted a barrier to their career progression, while more than a third (17/57) said that this was not the case. Older and more experienced educators were much more likely to regard the Cypriot culture and society as barriers to career progression, as were those from traditional locations such as Paphos and Larnaca. The interview data also showed that Cypriot society was linked to societal stereotypes. More than half of the interview respondents (11) acknowledged that stereotypes are among the reasons that women are under-represented in principalship roles.

Blackmore (1989) claimed that traditional patterns of behaviour prescribed certain roles to which women conform to differing degrees, and that is why they form part of women's identity, values and needs. More than half of survey respondents (32/58) stated that societal stereotypes constituted a barrier to their career progression, while about a quarter (14) said that this was not a barrier. Older and more experienced educators were more likely to experience societal stereotypes as a barrier. Principals working in more traditional locations, such as Paphos and Larnaca, were more likely to regard societal stereotypes as a barrier. This view is supported from interview findings on societal stereotypes, linked to Cypriot society and culture. One of the interviewees (P15) mentioned that Cypriot culture, and societal stereotypes, can easily be a facilitator and an inhibitor at the same time for a teacher's career progression. During her own career she found this factor to work as a facilitator for her, as she wanted to prove to everyone that gender doesn't play any significant role when it comes to accession to leadership positions.

Coleman (2007) stated that there is a stereotype of hegemonic masculinity that consciously and unconsciously influences our expectations of what a leader 'should'

be. Stereotypes linked to Cypriot culture were the most frequently named inhibitors during the interviews, mentioned by nine of the interviewed principals. These stereotypes were linked to the patriarchal family. One interviewee (P4) mentioned that 'sometimes the Cypriot culture duplicates stereotypes against women and I believe that this is happening due to the patriarchal model, which still exists'. As Hadjipavlou (2009) noted, the acknowledged head of the family in Cyprus is still the father. The data on societal stereotypes and discrimination data are very similar, suggesting that perceived stereotypical attitudes may be manifested as discrimination. Both factors appeared as barriers for accession to leadership positions for a majority of principals. Georgiou et al., (2002:81), referring to Cyprus, said that 'discrimination against women in regards to their promotion to leadership posts... should be considered unfair'.

Discrimination only seen as a facilitator

Almost half of the respondents (26/58) stated that discrimination was an important or very important influence on their decision to aspire to leadership positions. Older and more experienced educators and principals were more likely to feel influenced by discrimination. This also seemed to be more prevalent for principals in smaller towns such as Paphos and Larnaca. Discrimination did not seem to facilitate women's access to leadership, as no-one mentioned this factor during the interviews. There is limited literature on discrimination as a facilitator for women primary school principals, therefore this finding could be considered as an addition to the international literature.

Previous experience and seminars as a facilitator

More than half of the respondents (39/58) stated that previous experience was an important influence on their decision to aspire to leadership positions while only ten principals regarded this as unimportant. Perhaps surprisingly, younger and less experienced principals were more likely to value educational experience. The great majority of respondents (45/58) stated that their experience in the educational field was an important facilitator towards their decision to aspire to leadership positions. Six interviewees also mentioned that their previous educational experience was one of the facilitating factors towards their career accession. Moorosi (2010:2) identified the importance of networks, 'as the acquisition of qualifications, training and workshops, as well as participation in informal networks, is viewed as playing a crucial role at the personal level to prepare women for acquiring management positions'. Previous experience in education can also be linked to good relationships with colleagues and school staff. In their review of NCSL evaluations, Bush et al. (2006) show that networking is the most favoured mode of leadership learning.

More than half of the respondents (36/62) stated that leadership seminars were an important or very important influence on their decision to aspire to leadership positions. Understandably, less experienced educators were more likely to find them helpful than very experienced practitioners. These leadership seminars were designed to help new principals to prepare for their new challenges and responsibilities, and to learn how to develop their leadership styles. Pashiardis (2009) acknowledged that there is a need to recruit and develop a new generation of school leaders with the knowledge, skills and dispositions best suited to meet the current and future needs of education systems. It was, therefore, unsurprising that the findings were very positive for this dimension. Twelve interviewees also stated that seminars worked as a facilitator towards their career progression, one noting that they are organized in a way to provide new principals with the confidence they needed. One (P6) mentioned that 'the training seminars were vital for me as, before I applied for this position, I didn't have the confidence needed for it'.

Lack of mentoring as a barrier

The research of Lumby et al. (2010:20) indicated that, when participants showed their husband as their mentor, these were mostly educators. Quinn's (2014) research showed that there is a need for role models and mentors in the progression of potential female leaders and that fathers were important early role models. Data from the present research showed that, through having role models, principals became aware of their own individual strengths and weaknesses, and teach each other mentoring skills. More experienced principals were good role models for another principal's career. Lack of mentoring was an important inhibitor, mentioned by three of the 20 interview respondents. Data showed that absence of mentoring means that leaders do not receive the right guidance. Findings from this research suggested that mentoring as support for enacting leadership would be effective in breaking down the barriers for women and as a tool for leadership development.

Career breaks as a barrier

Another inhibitor, evident from the interviews, was the impact of career breaks. An interviewee mentioned that the requirement for fifteen years of experience, before applicants can apply for a leadership position, can be an inhibitor for women who need to take career breaks, and might be a reason for women to be under-represented in leadership positions. It may also inhibit women from taking extended maternity leave. As Coleman (2007:21) explained, 'the expectation that women will take maternity leave, rather than having a more extended career break, may not in itself have been helpful to women, as it has fuelled the expectation that women will take only short breaks for childbirth and childcare'.

Conflict of family and professional roles as a barrier

Moorosi (2010) acknowledged that family issues might be a barrier as women's chances of accessing promotion were limited because of their family responsibilities. A linked inhibitor mentioned during interviews was that of balancing family and professional life. The interviewees showed that women are often unwilling to apply for leadership positions, as they are thinking about how they will be able to balance family and professional responsibilities. Several principals linked their experiences to balancing their professional and personal role. Some of the women survey respondents (9/58) acknowledged that there is an overlap between their professional and family roles. Therefore, principals who are married to a supportive partner view their marital status as an advantage for their career (Lumby et al. 2010).

Data from the survey and interviews showed that most of the women principals acknowledged that there was sometimes an overlap between professional and personal life. Three interviewees commented that training seminars could be valuable in learning how to balance professional and family life. Moorosi (2010) noted that the performance of women principals was affected by family and domestic responsibilities.

Conclusion

This paper reports a significant study on women school principals in Cypriot primary schools. Both survey and interview findings reinforce the widely accepted view that leadership is context-specific. This is borne out in the impact of Cypriot culture, with its patriarchal assumptions, embedded within family structures and also affecting communities, notably in more traditional areas. Cypriot principals are also concerned with team harmony and group cohesion. Successful principals seek the opinions of teachers, students and parents, and strive for mutual understanding. According to Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra and Angelidou (2011), they also encourage staff to participate in discussions about values and beliefs.

The widely held belief that leadership is 'man's work' discouraged many potential leaders but the participants in this study succeeded in accessing leadership, demonstrating that such attitudes can be overcome with talent and determination. Pashiardis and Savvides (2014) note that promotion is based primarily on seniority. They acknowledge that principalship was not often pursued by many women but, over time, opportunities for promotion arose, and when they are able to be principals, they readily assumed this role. This was because a position of greater influence enabled them to support student learning and serve the needs of the school community in a more effective way. In the present research, all the participants stated that, even though they faced several barriers during their

accession to leadership, given appropriate levels of support, it was possible to overcome these barriers and become a successful principal.

This paper shows that women in Cyprus are over-represented at the classroom level but under-represented in more senior positions, including principalships, which have to do with the exercise of authority (Cyprus Statistical Service, 2012). Angelidou, Georgiou, Papaioannou, Xenophontos, & Pashiardis, (2002) comment that, although women make up more than 50% of the teacher population, they hold far fewer than half of the management positions in schools. The most recent data from Cyprus 2010/2011 (Cyprus Statistical Service 2012) for women in teaching and leadership positions, clearly demonstrate that women are under-represented in headship roles, with 27.1 per cent of male educators holding leadership positions, but only 17.5 per cent of women doing so.

Cypriot school principals seem to believe that their involvement in current activities does not contribute to their professional or personal development to a high degree and does not respond to their overall leadership needs Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra and Angelidou (2011). Interestingly the present paper shows that training of principals on the Cypriot educational system is agreeing with literature based in Cyprus (e.g. Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra and Angelidou (2011)), as this kind of training is primarily bureaucratic in nature and inadequate for the preparation of future school leaders Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra and Angelidou (2011). A recent study investigating the views of school principals in Cyprus about their professional development, revealed that they have a 'moderate' level of satisfaction from their attendance in in-service activities in general as school principals (Michaelidou, and Pashiardis, 2009). They seem to believe that their involvement in current trainings does not contribute to their professional or personal development to a high degree and does not respond to their overall needs as school principals Pashiardis et al. (2011).

The paper also identifies contextual differences between Cypriot urban and rural locations with traditional areas more likely to adhere to patriarchal attitudes, in respect of accession and enactment. More traditional areas (mostly rural areas) gave greater prominence to patriarchy, and parental and community attitudes towards gendered leadership strongly reinforced male norms.

The research shows that most of the newly appointed primary school principals in Cyprus received support from their spouses while accessing leadership positions, even though, during childhood, they experienced the patriarchal family model. This contrasts with previous research, which tends to emphasise support from other sources. Moorosi (2010:14), for example, showed that 'these women principals relied heavily on support from other family members such as mothers and sibling

sisters as well as domestic helpers, but noticeably less from spouses' (Moorosi, 2010:14).

The influence of societal culture is an established feature of the existing literature but the present paper is significant in extending traditional patriarchal notions to the more specific notion of the patriarchal family. The survey and interview findings highlight the significant role of the patriarchal family, which is still embedded in Cypriot society. Patriarchy influences girls' career choices from an early age, especially in traditional communities, as they observe gendered roles and see little evidence of women exercising leadership outside the home.

Another aspect of this paper is the evidence of a relationship between conservative communities and accession of women to leadership. While much of the current literature tends to offer a general overview of the issues facing prospective and current women leaders, this research shows that these factors play out in very different ways, according to the specific context. Traditional, mainly rural, communities reinforce ingrained stereotypical views while urban areas are more likely to adopt more modern attitudes to gendered leadership. The patriarchal culture remains powerful, especially in very conservative parts of rural Cyprus.

This research makes a significant contribution to the literature on women school principals in Cypriot primary schools. The findings reinforce the widely accepted view that leadership is context-specific. This is borne out in the impact of Cypriot culture, with its patriarchal assumptions, embedded within family structures and also affecting communities, notably in more traditional areas. In examining these contextual influences, this research also contributes to the wider body of knowledge in different international contexts, including South Africa (Moorosi, 2010), England and Wales (Coleman 2002) and Greece (Mitroussi, 2009), through its specific focus on the Cyprus context.

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