

EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AT SCHOOLS: INSIGHTS FROM A LIBYAN DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find challenges facing female Libyan leaders in leadership positions and how they overcome them. The qualitative research method was used to collect data from the participants. Twelve Libyan leaders from primary and secondary schools participated in this study. The data were collected through interviews, and content analysis methods were used. The findings show that Libyan women leaders face various challenges including sociocultural challenges and the need to balance family duties and work. However, by using different strategies they could overcome these challenges.

Introduction

Being a school leader requires diverse strategies and skills, whether a man or a woman takes on this responsibility. Education systems are constantly evolving, and these changes require visionary teacher leaders who understand their culture's harmonious, influential, and progressive nature. According to (Farrag, 2022), leadership is a process of persuasion undertaken by an individual or a management team to influence a group to pursue the goals the leader sets. This definition does not define or guide how women leaders can address specific issues related to women's leadership. Leadership involves motivating followers to act to achieve goals consistent with the values, motivations, desires, needs, and ambitions of the leader and followers. Women school leaders in Libya and around the world face many challenges that hinder their ability to provide effective school leadership.

Across the world, the representation of women in leadership positions has been widely discussed and highlighted over the past five decades ((Bowles et al.,2022). Similarly, underrepresenting women in educational leadership positions is a long-standing problem. Although 64 percent of teachers in the UK are women, women make up only 40 percent of school leaders. In secondary schools (2015-2016), only 38 percent of school principals were women (Fuller, 2017). Additionally, several studies indicate that women in private and public organizations hold 29 percent of all management positions in the United States. Despite these improvements, the proportion of women in management remains very low compared to their male counterparts, particularly in the education sector (Mbalilaki & Onyango 2021). In Canada, female principals represented only 42.1 percent (Holt, 2012). In Russia, only 19 percent of primary school principals are women (Shimalungwe, 2016). According to (Wood et al.,2018). in Australia, in all educational workplaces, women have not been able to obtain educational leadership positions, even though they have expressed the desire to do so and have the qualifications that justify their ability. In developed countries, the percentage of representation of women in management positions could be more encouraging.

According to a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), cited in Ramsay (2000), it was discovered that there is a significant global gender imbalance in government education. Men outperform women by about five times at the middle management level. Additionally, women tend to have limited aspirations, lack self-confidence, and experience work interruptions due to workplace instability (Alghofaily, 2019). This article explores the key barriers women face in leadership positions within schools, focusing on schools in one district in Libya.

Women in Education Leadership

The situation for women in leadership positions in education presents a mixed picture, combining courage and frustration. Recent statistics indicate a positive trend of increasing representation of women in various leadership positions in the education sector. However, differences persist in different areas of formal leadership, including serving as school board directors (Bahati & Ali, 2021). In educational leadership, (Maheshwari & Nayak 2021) asserts that collaboration between male and female employees is essential to ensure the effective functioning of schools and improve organizational performance. Collaboration promotes the exchange of knowledge, skills, and experiences among employees, which helps provide high-quality education. Collaboration among teachers toward teaching and learning goals and leadership goals can be achieved through joint efforts. (Qadir, 2019) asserts that creating a legal environment that ensures equal opportunities in leadership positions is essential for employee satisfaction and prosperity in educational institutions.

Cultural norms and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles

Social structures and cultural values significantly hinder women's access to leadership positions. Culturally ingrained laws in many African societies assign specific tasks and responsibilities to each gender, assuming that individuals must conform to societal expectations based on gender (Kangas & Lämsä, 2021). From this perspective, management positions are seen as the property of men, and women are encouraged not to aspire to such positions. This cultural dynamic is evident in the culture of traditional China, where women traditionally assume a submissive role at home and in the workplace (Fritz & Van Knippenberg, 2020). The belief that women are inherently weak compared to men and, therefore, unsuitable for leadership positions prevails in many developing countries (Shriberg et al., 2017). According to this hypothesis, management positions are reserved for men, and women should refrain from seeking these positions. Violating this expectation can lead to various social consequences, including reduced chances of marriage. (Fritz, & Van 2020). note that women, although they view themselves as equal to men, value their abilities less than their male counterparts. For example, when men and women are offered management positions, men express a greater desire to pursue these positions. In contrast, women may only hesitate once they feel fully prepared for these positions.

The challenges women face in balancing family life and work

Researchers Christman and McLellan 2012 highlighted the challenges women leaders face due to societal norms regarding leadership and gender. These barriers arise primarily from gender roles and greatly influence how women in leadership positions are perceived (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women leaders are constantly exposed to sexism, male domination, and systemic injustice within organizations, as well as the burden of unpaid work (Anwer et al., 2021). Additionally, women leaders often find themselves juggling responsibilities in the private and public spheres, including raising young children or caring for vulnerable people in the home who are facing violence, substance abuse, or poverty. This type of care represents one of the most sexed and gendered forms of work in contemporary societies (Anwer et al., 2021). In general, Libyan women face many challenges in balancing family work and their job as managers. This study will determine what challenges women face in leadership positions at Libyan schools.

Aim of the study

This research paper aims to discover the challenges that Libyan women face in school leadership positions, particularly on sociocultural barriers and balancing work and family duties. The research questions are:

- What are the sociocultural factors affecting women's leadership positions in Libyan schools?
- What challenges do Libyan women's leadership face in balancing work and family responsibilities?
- What do women leaders do to overcome the challenges they face?

Methodology

Research model

The research used a qualitative method of inquiry, where data was collected through interviews. The qualitative methodology was selected to gather substantial data, although the sample size was limited. Moreover, it is a more flexible approach since it enables participants to express themselves while providing data. (Guest & Mitchell, 2013). Furthermore, it offers the chance to develop specific insights. Such as speech, word choice, and non-verbal communication of the participants. The study uses a qualitative approach Using techniques influenced by researchers such as (Lewins & Silver, 2014) and (Creswell, 2011)

Sample of the research

The research focused on the Torhuna region, deliberately chosen due to its high representation of female leadership positions in educational agencies. The study included primary and secondary state schools, where twelve female leadership teachers participated, six teachers from primary schools and six female teachers from secondary schools. It included the school head and their deputy from each school. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed accurately. Before data collection, permission was obtained from the Department of Education of Tarhuna City, ensuring compliance with ethical principles.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview technique was used to collect information from the participants. It was collected through questions prepared by the researcher and reviewed by reviewers. Semi-structured interviews help to discover the problems faced by participants in the study, and the researcher can also study this problem in-depth areas with more detailed questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The questions that were prepared were related to knowing the challenges female leaders face in Libyan schools and the strategies they use to overcome them. Data was collected from participants after work hours through the WhatsApp program and recording calls. Each teacher was interviewed individually, and the interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The acquired data was subjected to thematic analysis, a technique used to identify, document, and analyze patterns or themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Rahi, 2017). Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore the data from multiple perspectives. This approach allowed the researcher to comprehensively examine and interpret the meaning embedded in the data set. To protect the identity of the participants, they have been coded as follows: from (BS 1) to (BS 6) for primary school leaders and from (SS1) to (SS6) for secondary school leaders. The opinions of participating teachers were presented as quotations, aiming to provide validity for the research

Findings and discussion

Sociocultural factors affecting women's leadership positions in Libyan schools

This study indicates the significant influence of Libyan society's cultural attitudes toward women in school leadership positions. Libyan society's culture towards women affects women's implementation of leadership roles. Traditional beliefs hold that men are right to assume leadership positions, not women (Carli & Eagly, 2011). Women face difficulty in overcoming these cultures that oppress women's rights within Libyan society and equate them with men. Despite what the former president, who ruled Libya for more than 40 years, said in his famous book, *The Green Book*, where Gaddafi said, there is no difference between men and women, and the distinction between them is blatant injustice and has no justification (Kawczynski, 2011). Cultural beliefs overcame these political opinions and distinguished between men and women. In every interview, the participants expressed concern about these cultures that prefer men over women in leadership positions. One of the participants (PS2) said that as long as we remain in our Libyan society, this culture will continue to affect us as a woman. In our culture, men come first, then women. "If there is one seat, a man and a woman, the man will take it while the woman remains standing". She wanted to clarify this by saying:

"These cultural issues are not easy to change. When my brother and I get in the car, they will give the front seat to my brother while I must sit in the back. Also, in our social events, they give food to the men first, then the women. This is how society views women, which cannot be changed".

In another interview with the participant (SS7), she said:

"in our Libyan culture, only men's decisions are taken, and women must implement them. This belief affects women as they are often ignored when they attempt to assume leadership positions". Another participant (SP9) said: Our predominant culture is that a woman's role is confined to domestic responsibilities at home, taking care of the children, and performing household duties, while leadership position is considered suitable only for men.

"One time, I told my husband's mother that I had become the school leader, and she was amazed and said to me, "Are you going to be a male!"

Another participant (SS11) said:

"I took over the school administrator position after a man headed it. One of the parents came to ask about the school principal, and when I informed him that I was the principal, he refused to speak to me and said there was no man to talk to".

All the participants show that they face many social and cultural factors that influence their positions as school leaders. Gender stereotypes, social values, and the cultural perception of authority that often favor men are considered major obstacles to the advancement of women in leadership positions. For Libyan society, it is not easy to accept the presence of a female director leading men. The man who refused to meet the manager asked for a man to tell him his problem. (Shava & Ndebele, 2014) Support these observations, noting that most men believe that women cannot be leaders except in the absence of men. On the other hand, (Al-Ahmadi, 2011) confirms that the link between management and male positions is the most important obstacle for women in developing countries. Culture and customs in Libyan society assume that positions and decision-making belong to men, while women must follow men.

In conclusion, the findings of this study show the effectiveness of sociocultural factors on women's leadership positions in Libyan schools. Cultural expectations, gender, and traditional beliefs in male authority hinder the advancement of women and perpetuate inequality between men and women in leadership positions. Addressing these sociocultural barriers requires a concerted effort to challenge gender equality and to foster an inclusive environment that acknowledges and values women leaders. By breaking down these barriers, Libyan society can harness the full potential of its female leaders and provide an equitable and inclusive educational system.

Challenges Libyan women's leadership face in balancing between work and family responsibilities

Despite efforts to achieve equality between men and women, women often make sacrifices when work conflicts with the needs of children and household duties (Carter, & Peters, 2016) confirmed that women are declining in leadership positions due to the challenges they face in balancing work and home responsibilities.

All the participants in this study were married with children, which means they had many household duties that interfered with their leadership roles. The participants revealed that while balancing life and work, they needed help prioritizing self-care.

One of the participants (PS11) said: *"I intentionally prioritize family and work over my health. For example, I have dental issues, but I do not have time to go to the doctor for treatment."*

Another participant (PP7) said: *"I go to bed late and wake up early so that I do not sleep more than six hours a day despite the conflict from work, just to balance family duties and work."*

(Brown, 2015). emphasized the importance of prioritizing health care and women getting enough sleep. However, most participants admitted to sacrificing their health and time to balance work and home. The study participants said they do not have enough time to enjoy with their husbands and children. Even on holidays, they do not go out to have fun but rather do their accumulated household duties.

One of the participants (PS12) said, *"I do not always join my husband and children on outings, and sometimes I apologize for attending family parties because I do not have enough time"*. This indicates that women sacrifice their leisure time to balance work and household duties. All the participants also indicated that their husbands do not help them with household chores, as one of them (PS5) said: *"Sometimes I work late, and my husband is at home, but he does not clean the house or cook food, as he considers it shameful to do women's work."*

This shows that Libyan women need more spousal support in household duties such as cleaning the house, cooking food, and caring for children. According to (Asma et al., 2024), sharing household chores positively impacts professional life and empowerment. It has also been shown that women whose husbands help them with household duties have less work-life conflict, are satisfied with their jobs, and enjoy their marriages. (Carman et al., 2013). Helping women with their family responsibilities positively impacts creating a balance between work and home responsibilities.

Another challenge Libyan women face in school leadership positions is achieving a balance between work and home responsibilities in the absence of their cars. Libyan culture considers women driving cars unacceptable, and this can create a major obstacle for women who hold leadership positions and need to travel to attend meetings frequently. Most participants said that their husbands bring them to work and return them home at the end of work. One of them (SP3) said: *"Sometimes I am late for work because I wait for my husband to take me to school, and sometimes I stay at school until my husband comes and takes me home"*. It is necessary to promote gender equality and empower women. This includes freeing them from traditional roles and societal norms and allowing them to drive cars to help them achieve a balance between their work and household responsibilities.

In conclusion, Libyan women in leadership face significant challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. Despite gender equality efforts, women often make sacrifices, risk their health, put their families first, and work above their well-being. Study participants highlighted their challenges in managing household chores along with their leadership positions. One of the biggest problems these women face is the need for extra help from their partners with household chores. Many participants felt frustrated that their husbands did not help them with cleaning or cooking, as they viewed these tasks as exclusively female responsibilities. This not only increases the amount and duration of these women's work, but also perpetuates gender norms and differences within the family.

In addition, participants reported that they found it difficult to spend quality time with their spouses and children during the holidays. Constant juggling work and family obligations leave no time for personal hobbies or family interactions. This highlights the importance of finding a good work-life balance. In addition, the scarcity of women unable to lead in Libyan culture creates an additional barrier for women in leadership positions. Attending meetings or work-related activities can be time-consuming and difficult, as they rely on their partners and other means of transportation. To achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, we must challenge entrenched social roles and norms, such as allowing women to drive.

To solve these difficulties, a comprehensive approach is necessary, including changing Libyan women's life choices. They will be able to reconcile their personal and professional lives as free Libyan citizens. If some women have the ability to serve their nation as leaders, they have a chance to serve it. Every working woman must have a

driving license. They serve in a good way, and they save their time in this way. They will be able to balance their life. They have enough time for their family to spend leisure time with their children and husbands, increasing support for spouses and family members. Policies and programs that promote work-life balance and gender equality capable of providing, as well as fulfilling family life, play a vital role. If women in Libya balance life with work and home, they can serve their country well. If they face some medical issues, they have the option and time to visit their doctor by themselves; there is no need to wait. All these studies about Libyan women's needs were found during this study.

Overcoming the challenges women leaders face in their positions

The study shows that women do many things to overcome the challenges they face in their leadership positions. Among them is the call for education in the field of gender equality. Changing cultural attitudes requires broad awareness and understanding. They organized workshops and held marches to support demanding equality between men and women and challenging cultural attitudes hindering women's progress. One of the participants, PS8, said: *"I was organizing many workshops and marches in support of the importance of gender equality in leadership"*. As a researcher, such initiatives can have a lasting impact on future generations, creating a more supportive environment for women. According to (Fisher & Coleman 2017) women are generally more methodical and planned in their advocacy, which can help the cause gain momentum and support. Women's participation in protests can also help dispel gender stereotypes and change public attitudes regarding women's responsibilities in public life. The study highlights the importance of women's marches and their beneficial effects in promoting change and expanding women's rights.

The study also shows that most participants tried to challenge the predominant cultural norms in society by starting a dialogue with their families and friends and changing the prevailing cultural views that hinder women from reaching leadership positions. In this way, the issue can be addressed from its roots. Participating in such conversations is a positive step towards breaking stereotypes and fostering a more supportive environment for women in leadership roles. One of the participants, PS3, said: *"I always talk to my family, relatives, and friends that these cultural norms that hinder women's progress are backward norms that must be changed."* While systemic change is crucial, individual actions within families and communities play a large role in gender equality. Women can employ such strategies to overcome social and cultural challenges and reshape them to suit women. In order to achieve gender equality, individual actions within families and communities play an important role. (Women, U. N. 2015). The UN Women's Report Progress on the Status of the World's Women 2015-2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights explores the interconnections between women's economic empowerment and the enjoyment of their rights and highlights the role of discriminatory social norms in limiting women's actions. The report believes that Progress toward gender equality requires changes in economic, social, and political areas and that individual work within families and communities plays an important role in achieving this.

According to the study, participants established support networks among their peers. They created a WhatsApp group and named it "Women School Leadership". SP12, one of the participants, said: *"I started this group seven years ago, and at first, the number of participants was no more than ten."* However; to date, more than 750 participants from inside and outside the city of Tahuna". Participants emphasized that to overcome challenges they face in leadership positions, they constantly consult with each other through this network and seek help from experienced school administrators. Another participant (SP1) said *"I have almost decided to resign from my position as headteacher after encountering a problem at school, however, when I raised this difficulty in the group, I received advice from experienced managers, and by following this advice, I could overcome all the difficulties and problems I encountered"*.

The study shows that participants collaboratively communicate via social media. They overcame all the challenges they faced in their leadership position because of this group. One of the ways women communicate and exchange experiences and information is through this organization. The organization provides a forum to share ideas and resolve any issues. Women leadership can share their problems and ask questions about specific ways to solve them. Additionally, the WhatsApp group provides peer support and encouragement, which builds members' self-confidence and helps them succeed in their leadership positions. According to (Medlin et al., 2020), WhatsApp is one of the most widely used messaging applications in the world. Through it, people can exchange ideas and solve problems. It is an effective tool for communication and forming a bond between individuals, through which ideas can be discussed and the problems they face can be solved.

According to the majority of participants, when asked what they do to overcome the challenges they face in balancing between work and home as women leaders, they expressed their need to bring work to home, especially in the face of deadlines. For example, (PS3) said, *"When homework becomes too much, I take some work to home and do it after I finish my household responsibilities."* However, she admitted that she had to bring certain

documents to meet deadlines. These statements suggest that school leaders are seeking to seamlessly manage their family and school responsibilities by trying to put work aside while at home. However, in reality, they had to multitask both at home and at school to achieve their goals in both areas. This study aligns with the research conducted by (Parker et al., 2017), which emphasizes that while there has been an increase in the number of women leaders in academia, they still have a greater responsibility in managing the demands of their home and work. Women frequently assume various responsibilities both in their households and educational institutions, in contrast to their male colleagues.

Another strategy expressed by school leaders is that they use to balance work and home responsibilities. Some of the participants said that they brought maids into the house to help them with household chores, while others said that their husbands refused to let them bring maids into the house, but they have relatives who help them. One of the participants, (SP11), said: *“When I am at work, I ask my sister-in-law, who is an unmarried girl, to come and help me, and sometimes she stays with the young children who have not yet gone to school until I return from school”*. All participants said that they ask other teachers to help them and assume some leadership positions when they are away from school for any reason

McKay & McKay (2010) described the situation of President Wilson, who lacked an efficiently organized secretarial team. He took excessive charge of evaluating and completing files and documents that should have been reserved mostly for his confidential assistants. President Wilson lacked the ability to make effective use of individuals. MacKay & McKay maintain the position that leadership traits consist primarily of courage, resilience, courage and determination, but place less emphasis on delegation. They assert that the skill of delegating intelligently and efficiently is an underappreciated but absolutely essential trait for a leader's success.

Participants in this study used delegation to complete tasks at home and school. They sought help from their relatives and colleagues to overcome the challenges they faced in balancing work and home. By intelligently practicing delegation, they successfully reduced the burden of work commitments and managed household responsibilities perfectly. Through the implementation of several preceding techniques, Libyan women successfully surmounted the obstacles encountered in their leadership roles. Furthermore, they demonstrated her capacity for leadership within Libyan society, on par with men, despite the challenging circumstances around them.

Conclusion

The study shows that Libyan women leaders face many challenges in their leadership positions. They face many sociocultural challenges like societal norms, gender stereotypes, and cultural perceptions of authority that prefer men over women. The results of our qualitative study are consistent with (Metcalf & Mutlaq, 2011). who demonstrated that women in the teaching profession face multiple obstacles when seeking leadership positions. These challenges include the prevailing negative stereotype of women among men and significant cultural and structural barriers. Also, they face challenges in balancing work and family.

Additionally, Libyan women face challenges in managing the demands of their work and family duties. Despite efforts to achieve gender equality, women often compromise, put their health at risk, prioritize their children, and prefer work over their well-being. Libyan women leaders highlighted the challenges they face in managing the demands of their professional responsibilities and family obligations. One of the main barriers these women face is the need for increased support from their partners regarding domestic responsibilities. A significant percentage of participants expressed dissatisfaction with their husbands not helping them with household chores, such as cleaning and cooking, believing that these responsibilities fall solely on women. These results are consistent with previously conducted studies (Bahiru & Mengistu, 2018) (Cho et al., 2015) that show women leaders face many challenges in balancing work and family duties in their leadership positions.

Despite all the challenges that Libyan women leaders face in their leadership positions, they have not remained idle. They used different strategies, such as organizing workshops and creating groups through means of communication to exchange ideas and solve problems, and going out in peaceful demonstrations to demand their rights and requesting help from their relatives at home and their friends at work; the Libyan female leaders were able to challenge all the challenges they face and were also able to balance work and household responsibilities.

Implications

The study highlights the cultural challenges women face in their leadership positions that hinder women's progress, calling for changing these cultures and establishing equality between men and women. The study also highlights the challenges women face in balancing work and home responsibilities, calling for support from their family members and friends to balance work and home. The study also reveals that Libyan female leaders use different strategies to overcome these challenges. These strategies can also be a guide for women aspiring to leadership

positions. It also calls on the Libyan Ministry of Higher Education decision-makers to develop laws to support women in leadership positions and make them equal to men.

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