



# Modeling cultural context for aspiring women educational leaders

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of the paper is to discuss and examine the development of frameworks and models to guide future research into studies of women’s paths to educational leadership worldwide.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A grounded theory approach to the development of a model of the factors and their interaction that determine the path to educational leadership for women is adopted, drawing on existing research for world-wide studies.

**Findings** – Past studies in this field have focused on identifying barriers and opportunities that are gender sensitive. With an increasing interest in developing educational preparation programs that are context and gender specific, there is a need to provide research frameworks to allow for meaningful comparisons between contexts to identify commonalities and differences, and for models to predict the likely outcomes of interventions in current procedures for drawing women into educational leadership. The model presented in the paper allows for the identification of those factors in any given context that influence the success of women aspiring to leadership.

**Social implications** – Understanding the culturally determined interaction of social and institutional factors that create unique contexts for career building is a prerequisite of developing leadership preparation for women designed to increase their successful entry into, and practice of, school leadership and to rectify their under-representation in this field worldwide.

**Originality/value** – Conceptualizing educational leadership for women at an international level is a newly emerging theme that this paper hopes to advance.

**Keywords** Women, Schools, Leaders, Leadership, Principals

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

The slow but steady increase in studies charting and exploring the ongoing under-representation of women in educational leadership worldwide has contributed to a deeper understanding of the commonalities and differences in the causes of this phenomenon across nations and cultures. At one level, women’s preferences regarding work and a career determine their interest in accessing educational leadership. At another, contextual factors may help or hinder women’s knowledge of educational leadership and their opportunities to gain practical experience of it. Cultural norms relating to women’s roles, leadership and the structure of organizations operate at both levels.

The context of women in educational leadership is now both local and global. At the local level, societal attitudes toward the education of girls, women’s domestic responsibilities and ability to provide leadership contribute to female self-image and ability to envisage careers involving leadership. Institutional structures, including qualifications and required work experience, promotion procedures and job descriptions may help or hinder women’s progress to leadership. In addition, each workplace encompasses informal attitudes and behaviors that may also support women, or discriminate against them.



At a global level, the Beijing Declaration (1995) and Millennium Goals (2000) have increased awareness of the social justice issues that are raised by the under-representation of women at policy making levels of education systems, and in the leadership of schools and higher education. These have provided a framework for examining trends of gender equality across nations and in many spheres of life. The majority of the world's nations are now committed to ensuring globally agreed upon goals for girls' education and women's representation in all areas of government by 2015. Increased understanding of the factors supporting under-representation and the actions that can be taken to address and remedy discriminatory practices has resulted from the need to meet these goals.

The purpose of this article is to examine these two aspects, the local and global effect of context, on women's journeys to educational leadership. A review of current theories around cultural differences in perceptions of the role of leaders and gendered leadership suggests that enabling and inhibiting factors to women accessing leadership will differ by culture. An examination of promotion procedures in three countries – Uganda, Bangladesh and India – shows the effects of both global and local factors in determining whether a similar process helps or hinders women's access to educational leadership. The article concludes with the development of a model incorporating global and local factors identified as determining the representation of women in educational decision-making positions in any given context, for use as a framework for developing cross-national and cross-cultural analysis of women's journeys to leadership.

### **Cultural context, gender and leadership**

Culture, as included in discussions of school leadership, has long been used to describe the effects of organizational understandings and ways of working. Recognition that these are, in turn, a response or interpretation of societal belief regarding leadership is a more recent field of study that has led to theorizing around the societal-cultural dimensions of leadership. Hofstede (1980, 1991, 1994), adopting the definition of culture as “patterns of thinking, feeling and acting” underlying “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1991, pp. 4-5) examined attitudes to leadership in corporations in culturally different societies. Theorizing from this research, he identified four cultural dimensions which he posits are universally applicable across all societies or nations: power/distance; uncertainty/avoidance; masculinity/femininity; and individualism/collectivism. Further refinement and modification of this basic model continues to emerge from ongoing research, including that of House et al.'s (2002) examination of attitudes to leadership and its practice in 62 nations.

While acknowledging the usefulness of Hofstede's framework for the purpose of cross national comparison, Heck (1996), Hallinger (1995), and Dimmock (2000) cautioned that how these studies and models of leadership are viewed and accessed is typically based on western (Anglo-American-Australian) models or emerge from a western perspective. They suggest that many of the cross national comparisons include an underlying assumption that these models of leadership represent “best practice” to which other societies and cultures ultimately aspire. In reality, effective organizational leadership must be finely tuned to accommodate cultural expectations. Noting that discussions of “culture” in educational leadership have traditionally

referred to organizational culture, Cheng and Wong (1995) and Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) called for research focused on societal understandings and expectations of school leaders. Dimmock and Walker (1998, 2005), and Walker and Dimmock (2002), endorsing this perspective, noted that the knowledge base currently utilized for training school principals is grounded predominantly in western leadership theories, that could well prove inappropriate when applied in different cultural settings.

While there is growing recognition of the effects of societal culture on leadership and the use of Hofstede's societal-cultural perspective as, for example, in studies by Wong (2006) and Ribbins and Zhang (2004) of school leadership practices in China, there are comparatively few studies that examine gendered leadership from a cultural perspective (Collard, 2001; Scrivens, 2002). Norris and Inglehart (2000), who explored gender inequality in political leadership as indicated by World Values Surveys conducted in 55 countries, concluded that while egalitarian attitudes toward women in leadership positions are more widespread in post-industrial societies:

Culture matters ... favorable attitudes towards women's leadership, by themselves, are not sufficient to produce effective breakthroughs in the structural and institutional barriers, especially in the short term. Nor can we expect overnight change in deep-rooted traditional beliefs about the appropriate division of sex roles prevalent in many developing and post-Communist societies (p. 14).

National studies of women seeking leadership that compare the experience of women from different ethnic groups suggest that ethnicity adds another layer of complexity to the gendered understandings of leadership that women must negotiate to access politically powerful positions (Hewlett *et al.*, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2003).

Thus the findings from studies of socio-cultural effects on leadership suggest that men and women aspiring to, and currently practicing educational administration and leadership will be influenced by both organizational and socio-cultural understandings that differ both by ethnicity and gender. An increasing number of studies of the impact of educational organizational culture in western societies indicate that women frequently characterize this culture as masculine (Shakeshaft, 1987; Marshall, 1995; Hall, 1996; Brunner, 1999; Blackmore, 1999; Strachan, 1999; Grogan, 1996; Skrla *et al.*, 2000; Coleman, 2001; Young and McLeod, 2001; Reynolds, 2002). Women educational leaders and administrators also note they are expected to demonstrate "feminine" caring, nurturing leadership while exhibiting a "masculine" logical, competent, administrative style. This mismatch between policy understandings of gender equality in the workforce and the continuation of societal-cultural beliefs about gender and leadership is seen as a significant factor in explaining the under-representation of women in educational leadership even in countries where women have long had high representation in the teaching profession and enjoyed the protection of anti-discrimination policies with regard to employment and treatment in the workplace (Drake and Owen, 1998; Oplatka and Addi-Raccah, 2009). It is particularly acute within many developing countries (Oplatka, 2006).

### **International perspectives of societal culture and female educational leadership**

As researchers move beyond documenting the statistics and processes of the access and practice of female educational leadership in national educational settings,

cross-cultural comparisons have begun to emerge. A qualitative study undertaken by Adams (2009) examined the perceptions of the importance of culture on career choice and development of six women, three from Finland and three from the US of which four of the six were leaders in institutions of higher education. Adams concluded the Finnish and American women define their cultures differently, but all the women made a strong connection between their upbringing and approach to leadership. National culture, and ethnic group culture within the bigger national culture, provides the context in which socialization of individuals occurs, where norms of acceptable behavior, gender roles, and values for shared belief systems are developed and which can be oppressive for some segments of societies. It is through socialization, argued Adams, that individuals adopt values and norms that carry over to their leadership execution.

This understanding that men and women are socialized to understand and practice management and leadership in certain ways, are perceived by society to have innate traits associated with them, and that socialization and perception are specific to socio-cultural settings, has been explored in a number of nationally-situated studies. Studies of cultural constraints on female school leadership in China explored by Zhi and Zhang (2003), Li (1999), and Luo (2001) indicated that even a long period of communism publicly promoting the empowerment of women as necessary for the survival of society has failed to eliminate cultural biases towards male leadership and control of education systems and institutions. Research by Fahrenwald and Porter (2009) in Germany indicated a similar pattern of entrenched gender bias in the promotion of women to leadership in positions in higher education despite a long period of national commitment and institutional awareness of gender equal employment practices.

The growing number of nationally based studies of cultural effects on women's journeys to educational leadership allows for cross-cultural comparisons of factors that both help and hinder the journey and the development of a personal leadership style with educational systems and institutions. Comparisons across studies also indicate that these factors may operate differently in specific societal-cultural contexts. Cubillo and Brown (2003), in a study of women from nine countries undertaking advanced degrees in British universities, concluded that the barriers to women accessing educational leadership were not consistent across societies and cultures, or even homogeneous within society or culture. They suggested barriers were determined not only by the more familiar institutional and organizational power structures, but also by specific cultural and religious beliefs and values, and socio-economic and political factors. The authors concluded that only when the inter-relation of all these factors is examined will some understanding of the hurdles along women's career paths in educational leadership be gained.

### **Promotion practices and women's leadership**

An example of the opportunities for exploration of the culture-mediated effects of factors influencing women's access to educational opportunities offered by focused national studies is provided by studies of promotion practices in India, Uganda and Bangladesh. In India, the promotion of teachers in government run primary and secondary schools is on the basis of seniority or seniority-cum-merit. All teachers at state and district level are ranked by the number of days worked from gaining their

teacher qualifications and appointment to a first teaching position. Promotion to department head, vice principal or head of school is solely on the basis of seniority – when a vacancy opens, the teacher at the top of the seniority list is offered the position. There is no pre-appointment administrator training or qualifications to be gained before appointment, and no competition for vacancies. States and districts now publish their seniority list to further the transparency of the process (Kagoda and Sperandio, 2009).

At first glance, this gender neutral promotion practice appears to favor men. Women taking time out during a career for childrearing will rank much lower than male counterparts on the seniority scale and thus get offered a leadership position much later in her career. If a woman moves, perhaps to accommodate her spouse's career, she has to re-establish her seniority in her new district. But despite the apparent disadvantaging of women by a practice that penalizes them for undertaking the family duties expected by societal norms, a study of three women heads of school in a suburban area of Bangalore (Sperandio and Reo, 2009) suggested that a number of cultural factors could offset the negative effects of the promotion system for some women. The high value placed on education by their families, from three quite different socio-economic backgrounds, resulted in continued support for both their education and careers through early marriage and childrearing. The women noted they were expected by their husbands and families to take on the traditional managerial roles within the family that custom demanded of Indian women, activities that in many cultures require women to take time away from the workplace. But these women were able to fulfill domestic obligations and continue on their career path due to the availability of low-waged household staff and the traditional involvement of grandparents and other family members, who lived with them in accordance with accepted tradition, in childrearing. This allowed the women in the study to direct household affairs without being directly involved in the work associated with providing for the family, and to return to school for evening activities and events as required.

By contrast, Uganda, despite a traditionally male oriented culture, appears to be a favorable environment for women aspiring to secondary school leadership. The expansion of private education has created additional leadership positions in coeducational schools and has increased the number of single sex girl's schools with their preference for female administrators. Government affirmative action policies require that a negotiated percentage of new hires be women, and as teachers and school administrators are government officers, these policies apply to school leadership hiring to the benefit of women. In response to calls for the provision of safer and more supportive school environments for adolescent girls in Uganda, government regulations also require that each coeducational school has a woman in the position of principal or deputy principal (Republic of Uganda, 2002).

However, despite the increase in the leadership positions available to women, they are still heavily under-represented in educational leadership. An examination of the interaction of culture and promotion requirements explains this situation. Applicants seeking leadership positions in secondary schools must have a university degree, a teaching qualification and six years experience in secondary school teaching, two of which must be in a position of responsibility. An examination of the applicants for school leadership positions in 2005 (Sperandio, 2008) revealed that most women candidates

failed to meet these requirements. Further investigation indicated that for women to have completed the seven years of training and service requirement, they would have had to graduate before 1998. The school census for 2000 indicated that only 1,934 women in Uganda had the required university degree and teaching qualification and far fewer of those had acquired the six years of teaching and two years of administrative experience. This lack of qualified candidates is explained by the low priority given to educating Ugandan girls, only recently addressed by instituting universal primary education in 2000 and universal secondary education in 2008.

In addition, selection procedures have also worked against women given Uganda's male-dominated culture, which has until the very recent past, allotted few rights and many responsibilities to women. Women aspiring to leadership positions are required to obtain recommendations and appraisals from members of the school administration, still heavily male dominated. They must also go before a selection committee comprised of senior educators, similarly weighted towards male members. Both of these requirements have presented considerable barriers to women in the past. Current government measures to bring a gender balance to both school administration and the composition of the selection may ultimately offset cultural biases against women gaining leadership positions in secondary schools (Ministry of Public Service, Uganda, 2010).

A third example of cultural factors operating on selection and promotion processes can be found in Bangladesh (Sperandio, 2007). Like Uganda, Bangladesh has seen a massive expansion of private educational institutions, and little expansion of government secondary schools and a male dominated school leadership structure that reflects a Muslim society where women have traditionally not worked once married. Leadership positions in government schools only become available on the retirement or resignation of incumbents, with a group of highly qualified and long serving practitioners waiting their turn. The only women who could meet the formal qualifications, which include years of service and leadership experience just as in Uganda, are women employed in a small number of girls' schools. Where a number of applicants for school leadership positions hold similar qualifications, selection is undertaken by committees staffed primarily by men who, given cultural stereotyping of women, are unlikely to look favorably on women applying for leadership of co-ed or boys' schools.

However, in the non-formal education sector, where schools are opened and operated by non-government organizations (NGO) charged with filling the gaps in government school provision of basic education, women have much greater access to school leadership and educational policy making and implementation. This has been in response to the deliberate policies of these organizations to adopt internationally recognized gender equity standards motivated both by philosophical considerations and the practical need to qualify for external funding of their projects. In order to find female candidates to lead schools, NGOs such as BRAC, an organization which provides schooling to over a million Bangladeshi children and has appointed women to lead over 90 percent of its schools, have changed traditional hiring and promotion requirements. Married women in rural villages are targeted for these positions, and are only required ten years of schooling as long as they and their families agree to their attendance at monthly training at a regional center. The women who apply must have the support of their communities, and are filling roles of teacher and school head traditionally assigned to men. Both community support and assumption of traditional

male roles have challenged existing cultural patterns. In this way, a national organization responding to international understandings about gender equality has used hiring and promotion processes to remove the barriers to educational leadership for a group of Bangladeshi women.

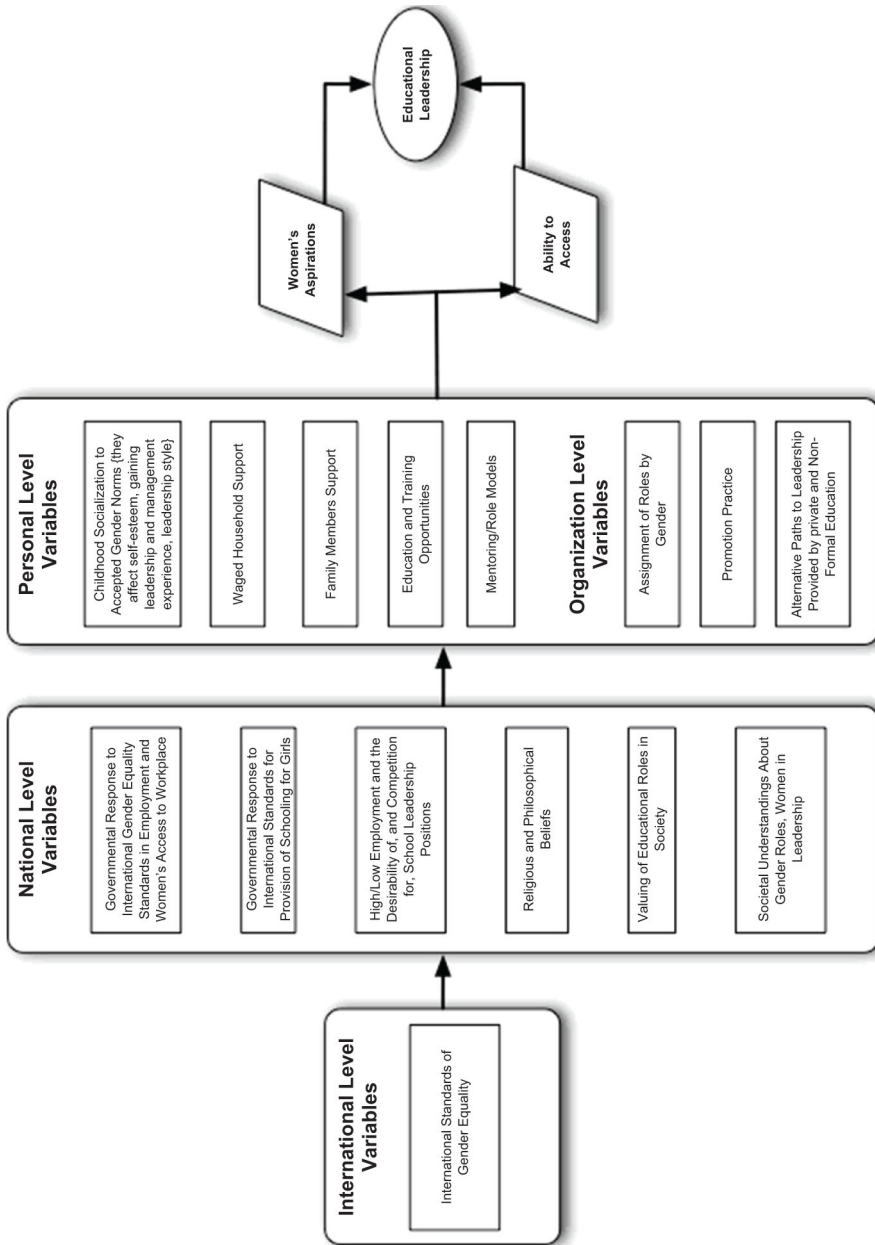
### **A model of female access to educational leadership**

Awareness of how cultural contexts can mediate the factors affecting women's access and journey to educational leadership suggests the need for a grounded model or analytical framework for use in cross-cultural comparisons of women's experiences at the national and ethnic group level. Dimmock and Walker (2006) adapted Hofstede's cultural characteristics theory to explain culture mediated differences in women's journey to leadership and the existence of gendered differences in leadership style. However, drawing variables directly from the literature of women's access and aspirations to education leadership suggests another model of use for comparison of women's experiences in different cultures. The variables in Figure 1 can, in different cultural situations, act as facilitators or barriers and be of major or minor importance in influencing aspirations and access to leadership. Culture can also influence the interaction of these variables to produce quite different outcomes in national or ethnic group environments.

For example, in a given country, a desire to conform to international standards of gender equality may prompt the national government to extend opportunities for female education and training leading to increased female aspirations to education leadership. However, if religious beliefs and societal understandings about acceptable roles for women and their seclusion in the home remain unchanged, women's ability to access leadership positions will be unaltered, limited for the most part to single sex educational institutions. In a second country, international standards may already be exceeded by national legislation controlling gender equality in the workplace, educational opportunities and promotion practices, making women's ability to access educational leadership comparatively easy. However, the high cost of household help, low levels of family cohesion, and the need for both partners in a marriage situation to work, may lead to few women aspiring to what may appear a demanding and poorly rewarded career choice. Bringing the same change to one variable – for example, requiring leadership training prior to promotion – will have quite different effects in each cultural situation, and may be predicted by the use of the model.

### **Conclusion**

Research in the field of women in educational leadership has evolved from primarily descriptive studies of women's representation in all levels of decision making in national education systems, to the analysis of the factors at the national and ethnic group level that enable or deter women from aspiring and accessing educational leadership in a given culture, to cross cultural comparisons of the interaction of common variables. With the increasing interest in leadership preparation, and the slow progress to gender equality in educational leadership – even in those countries including the US and the UK where it has been promoted for some time – a more nuanced approach to increasing both women's aspirations and ability to access educational leadership is needed.



**Figure 1.**  
A model of factors influencing women access to school leadership



The use of a model of the variables involved in women's journeys to educational leadership to frame regional or national studies has the potential to focus research on contextual barriers and opportunities for women aspiring to leadership. Beyond this, the use of the model would lead to a greater understanding of the likely effects of interventions to increase the success rate of women aspirants within the regional context and contribute to the design of context specific leadership preparation. With so much at stake, the need to direct research in women and educational leadership to provide useable outcomes is paramount, and the development and testing of theories and models should be a part of this process.

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