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The challenge of leadership: ethnicity, culture, gender
and class among school leaders in
England, Malaysia and Pakistan

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Do you know how many people walk into my school after four years and go to my secretary or one of the PAs to be the head teacher? People turn up at my door and actually walk away or assume I am the secretary....
(African Caribbean Leader 1)

‘Leadership is a very ‘gendered’ concept [while] in a wide variety of cultural contexts, leadership continues to be identified with the male.’ (Coleman, 2003: 37)

Although black and minority ethnic women hold leadership positions in professional organisations (e.g. schools, higher education institutions, government, business), little attention has been paid to the experiences of women - other than middle- or upper-class white females - in leadership positions.

This study provides a valuable contribution to the contemporary debates about intersectionality and leadership by exploring, through narrative inquiries, the leadership experiences of women from black and other ethnic minority groups in England and Malaysia and Muslim women principals in Pakistan.

- It sheds light on their experiences and provides nuanced understandings of their leadership career path and the challenges they encounter.
- It examines whether and how ethnicity and gender influence women's leadership practices.

Leadership, gender and race

‘Issues of identity have been examined in relation to intersectionalities of difference, such as “race”, class and gender’ (Bhopal and Danaher, 2013: 21), while the examination of identity requires an understanding of the notion of culture and ethnicity.

- The invisibility of black women’s experiences in research that privileged white women’s voices in gender studies and black men’s voices in race studies.
- The under-representation of women in leadership positions, as women may be perceived as ‘outsiders’, given that leadership has been identified with men (Moorosi, 2010; Schein, 2001).
- The discourse about gender and leadership highlights the overt and covert barriers to their progress (Coleman, 2007; Kaparou and Bush, 2007).

There remains work to be done to achieve true gender equality at the very top of organisations, given the recognised ‘covert’ gender discrimination and the implications of ‘double jeopardy’ for black women in leadership positions (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Showunmi et al.'s study (2015) showed the interplay of identities within the leadership experiences of a diverse group of women leaders – CEOs, business owners, local politicians, senior public sector workers - in private and public organisations.

‘Transformation and transformative leadership are often mentioned in the literature on advancing social justice outcomes’. (Lyman et al., 2012: 169)

Methodology

Women principals' stories and experiences of identity and leadership were explored through narrative inquiry.

Nine participants, aged between 25 and 60, came from a culturally diverse group of women with 5 to 34 years of work experience within the education sector.

England: 6 women principals: 2 African-Caribbean, 1 African, 2 South Asian and 01 who identifies as BME (Black Minority Ethnic)

Malaysia: 1 principal of Chinese background

Pakistan: 2 Pakistani principals - Muslims of South Asian ethnicity.

- Semi-structured interviews
- Participants were asked questions around three key areas:
 - (1) their personal definitions of leadership,
 - (2) the relationship between their social identities (gender/minority-ethnic/cultural/religious) and identities as leaders, and
 - (3) their career journey into leadership, including when they first saw themselves as leaders, and factors that may have hindered this journey.

The English case

Data are drawn from six school principals' narratives which form part of a larger study of 130 women practitioners in the state and private sectors in London.

Some of the BME women in the wider study were reluctant to define themselves as leaders and referred to the Western concept of leadership to assist them in denying that they were leaders.

Their leadership style was being questioned by others who held stereotyped and prejudiced views on how women from BME backgrounds should lead.

Some expressed concern that high-level leadership positions were being indirectly denied to leaders with childcare responsibilities.

BME leaders have articulated their concern about barriers to women gaining and exercising leadership, fuelled by stereotypes related to gender and ethnicity.

Cultural stereotyping in leadership

Masculine and feminine models of leadership based on Western (white middle- and upper-class) gendered identities exclude the experiences of other groups and render them non-legitimate or unimportant in the production of knowledge.

When some of the senior women were appointed to their current position, the challenge was breaking down the preconceived stereotype that their team members held.

The issues that arose focused on the BME leader instead of the need for the team to develop in its understanding of diversity.

An example of a woman leader's belief that BME leaders are stigmatised:

*People try to box you in, and if you are a white leader I would imagine, I don't know I'm not one, or if you are a male leader you don't have to be defined by this very strict box, you can be whoever you want to be. You are allowed to be diverse and yet ironically we are the people who are supposed to be the diverse leadership.
(Asian leader 1)*

The Malaysia case

I was appointed by the Ministry of Education to head the school [...] and I was sent to a different district ...to defuse a political situation. The board had their own candidate (someone whom they could control), the different racial political parties had their own candidates and the school was in the constituency of the opposition party.

Gender and race discrimination underpinned the school board's disapproval. The fact that 'the board had their own candidate' reveals the power of politics and of cultural communities during the selection stage.

I did not expect to rise to the level of principal as I was disadvantaged by several factors:

- A female (predominately principals were male)*
- Non-Malay (limited schools for non-Malay females)*
- Do not have 'O' Level Chinese language so that means not qualified for Chinese schools despite [being] able to converse and understand the language*
- Not Methodist although the approval of the Methodist Council Board is required.*

Prejudice may be perceived as representing 'the glass ceiling' (Coleman, 2001; Wirth, 2001) which hinders women's progression up the career ladder.

I also suspect that the Chinese community preferred male, as male teachers could easily fit in and socialise with the members of the board, ... and be better in their role.

The conservative and hierarchical norms of the Chinese community may reinforce the acceptance of a stereotypical male leadership style.

The Malaysian participant's British colonial education equipped her with a 'colonial mentality' (Whitehead, 1995) which may have influenced her performance as leader.

The Pakistani case

The stories of these two Pakistani women revealed that women in a Muslim society generally face pressures from family and society, and that they have to fight against pre-conceived gender discrimination, where male dominance is a powerful image (Shah, 2015).

Their domestic responsibilities and motherhood remain central in their lives, since the Quran states that the family is the main responsibility for a woman.

A female has to perform the dual functions of a male and a female as well. She is earning for a family like a male and she is serving her family like a female. (Pakistani leader 2)

Women believe that they have to sacrifice more than men as a prerequisite for leadership positions. Many successful female role models are childless .

The qualities which are desirable for men are taken as negative for women: for example, being too bold and strong is taken as being contrary to femininity.

Their leadership practices underpinned their religious beliefs.

My religion is important to me as it shapes who I am as a Muslim woman. [...] I lead through experience and with the spiritual guidance of my belief. (Pakistani leader 2)

The concept of Izzat :

As a woman leader I have multiple responsibilities... I have to support my family and members in the community and there are times when I am seen as somebody that is going against what I should be doing as a Muslim woman. I find [I am] doing more and more so that people accept me as a leader. (Pakistani leader 2)

Conclusion

This research contributes to the discourse about racial and ethnic diversity in leadership, through exploring BEM and Muslim women leaders in three different contexts.

It adds to international explorations of leadership within a 'cross-cultural [comparative study] of school leaders in different societies' (Dimmock and Walker, 2002: 72).

Despite the different focus on leadership styles, participants showed a tendency to adopt stereotypically male attributes (e.g., target-driven, authoritative), especially at the beginning of their career and in their attempt to establish their leadership reputation in their school contexts. Many of the women were unable to be their authentic selves as they appeared to be confined to a particular box.

All women in the English and Malaysian cases clearly stated that they were facing challenges as minority leaders due to gender and ethnicity. 'Men are favoured while women are discriminated': experienced by the Pakistani woman leaders (covert discrimination -Coleman, 2007).

Prevailing prejudice and covert discrimination against women are still problematising the discourse of gender and leadership.

The narrative inquiries of women participants in this study show that the intersected identities can challenge the status quo, and give an insight about leadership enactment beyond the eyes of whiteness.

If women of colour continue to be left out of the data, then the findings may be questioned over the representativeness of the sample.

Influenced by the study by Johnson and Campbell-Stephens (2013) about 'Investing in Diversity'- a Black-led programme which addresses the under-representation of BME leaders in London schools - we argue for the urgency of customized leadership programmes.

Developing black women and those from minority ethnic groups on the basis of their cultural needs will help them 'bring who they are to their leadership' (ibid: 24).