Article

Women, Educational Leadership and Societal Culture

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Abstract: This paper argues that women's participation in the public and their access to senior leadership positions is defined by cultural and belief systems in a society. It draws upon a study of Women College heads of women-only colleges, in a region in Pakistan, to unveil the discursive dynamics in that societal context where complex factors interact to determine what is acceptable in that culture. This has implications for women' roles and determines their practices as college heads. The study also unveiled the culturally-informed strategies adopted by these women professionals to exercise their role as college heads in the presence of multiple cultural constraints.

Keywords: gender; educational leadership; cultural and belief systems

1. Introduction

Social institutions such as educational organizations and the practices therein are made up of diverse and often contradictory discourses. Each formation can be seen as consisting of a set of shifting and dynamic discourses, where multiply-positioned subjects discursively constitute meanings and truths to guide the practice in a specific societal context. This paper draws on a study of Women College heads in a region in Pakistan to unveil the discursive dynamics in that cultural context where diverse factors interact to determine 'what is to be done and what is acceptable at a given moment' ([1], p.75). Positioned as women educational leaders in a Muslim society where according to the religious texts, 'knowledge' and 'knowledge-giving' are attributes of God and legacy of prophets with associated claims to respect and obedience [2], these women college heads experienced de-powering that defined and determined their gendered professional role and practices.

The study aimed to search for the 'regimes of truth' as historically and culturally situated, recognizing that discourses are constituted in time and space [1,3,4]. Foucault [1] argues for pluralization of causes governing practices, suggesting to analyze 'regime of practices' which have both prescriptive effects regarding what is to be done and what is acceptable at a given moment, and codifying effects regarding what is to be known. Practices are not just governed by institutions, prescribed by ideologies, or guided by pragmatic circumstances. In fact, these can be understood as places where what is said and what is done meet and interconnect ([1], p. 75). In the interplay of competing truths and contesting discourses, meaning making becomes a political act underpinned by the relevant power and positioning of the participating subjects, and becomes further complicated by the situated constructions of gender in a Muslim feudal patriarchal society in the context of this study.

This paper is developed from qualitative data seeking understanding of leadership roles and practices of women college heads in a specific region in Pakistan. There is a general dearth of research, national and international, and particularly a scarcity of research related to educational leadership and gender in that region. Pakistan is a Muslim society with feudal patriarchal structures and traditions. The Constitution of Pakistan [5] claims to ensure that all laws and practices are in accordance with the Islamic *Sharia* (religious law). Guided by the religiously endorsed practice of sex-segregation in Pakistan, the educational institutions in the public sector are mostly single-sex. Segregation is observed more closely in the rural regions than in the urban areas, and is generally stricter at post-primary-to-pre-university levels which cover the secondary education and the college sector. The age factor of the students at this level is perceived as sensitive within socio-religious discourses related to sex, chastity, and moral code of conduct [6].

The study focused on women-only public colleges, known as *Zanana* (female) colleges in one geographical region. There were thirty *Zanana* colleges in that region at the time the study was conducted. The data was collected by a semi-structure questionnaire sent to all the women college heads followed by one-to-one interviews with ten women college heads who agreed to be interviewed. Difficult traveling conditions in most parts of the geographical region, in interplay with the socio-cultural norms placed constraints on female travel for both the researcher and the participants, influencing the sample size. The data was rich and huge, providing insights into the leadership roles and practices of women college-heads in that segregated Muslim Asian society.

2. Women and Educational Leadership

In spite of an increasing association of teaching role with women globally, their presence is conspicuously low in senior educational leadership positions across countries and cultures [7–15]. There are some broadly shared factors such as gender power relations, role stereotyping, role socialization, public/domestic divide and others leading to this phenomenon [9,16–18]. However, it will be extremely simplistic to assume that these factors are constructed and en-acted in similar ways across cultures and societies. The situated cultural and belief systems, and social patterns of behavior determine the discourses shaping the concepts and practices in each context.

Roles are socially constructed, be these domestic roles or public. In this research context, social was further enmeshed with religious to the extent that to disentangle and identify the discourses was problematic. This had significance because of the validating authority held by the religion [19,20], and effectively appropriated by men. In spite of an equal emphasis on education for both men and women

in Islam [20] 'So far as religious teaching is concerned, traditionally Muslim women have not been well versed' ([21], p. 131). Consequently 'they have been barred from *ijtihad*, religious discourse and interpretation' ([21], p. 131; see also [22,23]). The spaces for religious interpretation and discourse formation have been male dominated. Through vested re-descriptions of roles and practices, the political and the socio-cultural have wielded power often in the guise of religious, producing discourses to marginalize and depower women in all spheres of activity.

The paper will debate the women college heads' roles and practices as lived in the research context, with specific reference to role socialization as influenced by socio-religious discourses, structural constraints such as segregated education system, and gendered discourses of veiling, *izzat*, and family honor. The intention is to unpick the power technologies availed to marginalize and depower women college heads.

3. Role Socialization

Grounded in the principle of justice and equality, Islam recognizes a complete equality between women and men regarding their spiritual, intellectual, and physical potentials:

> "O people! be careful of your duty to your lord, Who created you from a single soul and created its mate of the same and spread from these two a multitude of men and women" ([2], 4:1).

However, within the context of relationships, certain positionings have claims to higher respect and authority, the highest being commanded by the parents. Significantly, a mother's claims to love and obedience have been prioritized in the Quran and the Hadith, and 'For Muslims motherhood is understood as a metaphor for the loving guidance and authority of compassion in Islam' ([24], p. 88; Also see Abdalti, 1994). In Islam, a family unit gets established with a man and woman joining in a 'marriage contract' in accordance with the Quranic injunctions. Women and men have equal rights to set the conditions, including the woman's role in and outside the family space, and her right to end the 'contract' ([22], p. 77; [8], p. 90). This contract is made in the public arena, with witnesses, and it is supposed to guide the practices in the family. There is no barring of men from domestic work or of women from non-domestic work as such. However, in practice the women's role primarily has been associated with the domestic, and in this study also women college heads emerged very conscious of their domestic role as Muslim women:

> Family is a woman's first responsibility. … We all wish to stay [and work] nearer to our homes (Interview Quote).

They were encouraged to become invisible through given interpretations of the notions of motherhood and family [25]. Family in the research context meant the extended family, including in-laws, parents, siblings and others. Besides responsibilities towards children and husbands, the participants also mentioned caring responsibilities towards in-laws and being expected to be available for different extended family members. 'Discourse of motherhood and wifely duty to household for honorable, implying otherwise who extend the sphere of activities' ([26], p. 73) effectively confined women. They were culturally constructed as 'site of familial honor' ([21], p. 129), and thus the 'guardian', as pronounced by the Quran, became 'the guarded' in practice, subject to 'surveillance'

and manipulations. In Islam women have a nurturing responsibility towards the 'family', and men are the 'maintainers'. This prioritizing of women's domestic role is often exploited in Muslim societies to limit women to the domestic. It is often ignored that if there were no professional roles for women, the Quran would not be explicit about women being masters of their own possessions, earnings ([24], p. 102) and inheritance:

> 'Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned'. ([2], 4:32)
>
> 'Unto the men (of a family) belongeth a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, and unto the women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be little or much - a legal share'. ([2], 4:7)

Siddiqi claims that 'According to strict Islamic injunctions, it is not obligatory for a woman to cook the food for her husband or children, or to wash their clothes or even to suckle the infants' ([27], p. 57). However, in practice, religious texts have often been interpreted to confine women to the domestic, socializing them into nurturing, supportive and peripheral roles to ensure the male dominance of the centers. Moves by women towards the centers to participate in the public have often been countered by the discourses of family, family role/responsibility and by gendered constructions of a good Muslim woman. Thus, on the one hand, their access to high-powered jobs and leadership positions is controlled in the given 'family interests', and on the other hand they are expected and even made to work harder for the same family interests [28], but in positions where they and their earnings are controlled so that they do not become a challenge to male authority. The female de-powering by the male-dominated socio-eco-political discourses and traditions acquired social validation through given interpretations of religious texts, and affected the women college heads' participation and performance in the public domain. They avoided aspiring for senior mainstream jobs in mixed settings because:

> Men get angry if a woman is appointed in a senior position. Their stand is that women should be selected for women only posts but not for open-to-both ones. ... As long as we are in subordinate positions, there is no problem (Interview Quote).

Women appeared to accept these norms. There was a clear emphasis on priority of family role and responsibilities over the professional role. Many participants admitted of having at different times let go of headship if it meant any disruption of family set ups. However, there was resentment at the devaluation of women and their contributions in the professional domain, as one participant complained:

> In general, attention is not paid to women's words. Their opinion regarding any official matter is not given that weight as a man's word. Then, being a woman, it does not seem appropriate to argue with men (Interview Quote).

4. Segregated Education System

Single-sex colleges are expression of a dominant tradition of sex-segregation in most Muslim societies, often justified in the name of religion [6]. In the context of this study there were separate colleges for males and females. However, due to pragmatics involved, this dichotomy was not as

complete as for example, in Saudi Arabia [29,30]. In these *Zanana* colleges, finance staff, support staff, and some others junior employees were males. Outside the *Zanana* colleges, the main stream senior management positions in the education department and all the positions in the finance offices at all levels were occupied by men. This added to the complexity of roles and practices, and sex-segregation emerged as a political mode of ordering roles and practices where female colleges became defined as female space within the 'family' with role associations transferred from domestic to professional site. The college heads positional power was often usurped even by the junior male staff who restrained their exercise of positional power through weakening their hold over money/finances, affirming that:

> Actors in subordinate positions are never wholly dependent and are very often adept at converting whatever resources they possess into some degree of control over the conditions of reproduction of system ([31], p. 25).

The re-structuring of boundaries and socialization in segregation discouraged women from transgression of boundaries and acted as barrier to net-working and communication with male colleagues/seniors. A further complication was the increased reliance on male 'subordinate' staff in dealing with financial matters and finance offices, regionally and centrally. In spite of women's right over earnings and resources in Islam, Muslim societies in general [22], and given interpretations of Islamic texts in particular have strengthened patriarchal practices [23], converting the Islamic dictum of male responsibility 'to spend of their wealth on their family' ([2], 4:34) into male control over finances leading to the exclusion of women from the sphere of public activity, associated in particular with finance management. The participants were unanimous that Women College heads 'suffer a lot because of social norms and pressures—it is inappropriate for women to visit banks or other male offices' (Interview Quote). This often resulted in malpractices by the finance-related male staff, who acquired control over resources and processes, and tended to abuse it:

> A case was registered against a clerk. He used to leave a small blank space with the figures and after the principal had signed the bill, he would add a figure there (Interview Quote).

Having a control on finance-related paper-work and processes in interplay with accepted social practice of exchanging gifts further encouraged malpractice among these low-paid staff:

> The college budget provided uniform allocation for the menial staff. Once the concerned bills were put on my table and I signed them. A few weeks later, I asked my peon where his uniform was and what its color was. He responded that he was given no uniform but just Rupees 180/- and half of that was kept by the *babu* (accounts clerk). … I remember another case; a student came to claim his scholarship cheque and the clerk accepted *salaami* (offering) from him (Interview Quote).

Not having appropriate access to finance offices affected women's learning of finance related skills. They accepted that the nature of finance-related issues was perhaps similar in male and female colleges but these were less problematic for men 'because people in audit, finance, superintendents, clerks, they are all male. The problem is that females maintain a distance from them and don't learn. Males get close to them and learn the job' (Interview Quote). In addition to that, sex-segregation also affected women's career progression to mainstream posts beyond the single-sex institutions, as well as

their participation in those professional development programs, events, and activities which were not segregated. This had implications for their professional development, career progression, and socio-professional net-working as well as for their self-esteem, as obvious from the quote below:

> The Secretary Education was to preside over the Annual Prize Distribution in a male college. The new local Divisional Director Colleges (the first woman Divisional Director Colleges), was not invited by the college principal to that ceremony, contrary to the previous practice. When it was brought to the Secretary's notice, he advised the lady on phone to be present at the ceremony. She went to the college at the appointed time. ... The principal was angry to see her and told her rudely that no seating arrangements had been made for women (Interview Quote).

As long as women college heads functioned in their own sphere without moving into the male world they were left alone. Beyond the *chardiwari* (four walls) they were made to feel un-welcome and even threatened, emphasizing the public/private boundary. The *Zanana* colleges emerged as female spaces where women college heads operated but they were discouraged from entering into male territory where the control over resources and the finances traditionally belonged.

5. Gendered Discourses

Foucault argues that 'Truth … is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint' emphasizing that 'each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true' ([3], p. 131). In spite of the Islamic emphasis on equality and justice across all divides including gender, the discourses that were 'accepted' and that 'functioned as true' were clearly reflective of inequality and discrimination across the gender divide. Discourses, evolved from localized social and behavioral norms, were exploited to marginalize women in the name of religion and culture. Socio-religious construction of women contributed to their 'marginality both in their professions and in the public mind' ([32], p. 4). On the college sites, a submission to boundaries by the women and associated discomfort and uncertainties at moving across/between the boundaries (*zanana/mardana*) became indicative of role stereotyping. The discourses of *izzat*, *veiling*, segregation and family honor interacted to produce relationships of power and modes of ordering relationships which impacted on leadership role and practice [6]. Kezar [33] defines 'history of relationships' as a 'power condition' which defines relative power in professional relationships. Prone to be easy victims to 'social indictment' and 'scandal', women opted out of 'visibility' in a cultural context where social-gossip and character assassination were undisciplined. Many participants referred to social black-mailing, which put constraints on their mobility and contacts. They were disciplined into non-aspiring in anticipation of the possible social threats:

> No one is interested in going [away from family home] as a principal. Whoever wishes can publish anything against you in the [news-] papers ... anything false or completely baseless, which not only affects you professionally but makes social life difficult in our society (Interview Quote).

The Islamic teachings related to sex, chastity, morality, and the code of conduct were exploited to control women. They were discouraged from equal participation in the public through given

discourses of *izzat,* family honour, veiling and segregation. For a woman it would be a violation of family *izzat* to move into 'male domains', rendering them open targets to 'character assassination'. An honorable family could be destroyed through the character assassination of a woman-member of the house. This encouraged immobilization and invisibility of women—a 'power technology' linked with sex-segregation. The fear of character assassination and its social consequences effectively discouraged communication and movement across the boundaries, with quite explicit demarcations of the sites of activity. The participating women agreed that the risks involved in moving across the boundaries were too many:

> If you are a woman, you would be immediately labeled as immoral. If a male visits your office a few times consecutively, you would be declared having an affair with him. I once travelled for an official meeting with a married male college head, and there was another male colleague in the car. I stayed in the women's hostel and returned with a family. When I got back after a week, I learned that a local paper had published a news item about my affair and engagement with that head. … The moral standards for men and women are the same in Islam, but there are immense social pressures [for women]. If a women's reputation is effected no one would marry her; and it would affect her career also.

Double moral standards for men and women [21] and a politically constructed notion of '*izzat*' controlled women in public and private alike and promoted male control. The separate patterns and standards of conduct/character applied to men and women were socially endorsed as propounded by Islam; and women, by not having access to places of interpretation submitted to those with serious implications for their professional roles. Reinforced by cultural norms, this controlled their professional performance and participation. The discourses were manipulated and misappropriated to 'blackmail' women into silence and invisibility, subjecting them to a close surveillance, as mentioned by many women participants.

The skewed codes of conduct constructed by male authority posed threats to women who chose or dared to move in the positions of visibility. Incriminating the moral character of a woman in a visible leadership position stigmatized and consequently depowered her, particularly if she happened to be without a socio-political umbrella. Attributes such as 'seditious, corrupt, or prostitution … granted freely to women but not to their male 'accomplices'' ([26], p. 74) further acted as a de-powering technology. Women managers, who were interviewed, emphasized that they were often playing in a defensive position. They compulsively relinquished equal freedom of mobility in the work context, which negatively impacted on their performance, progression and effectiveness. They felt under pressure because of given constructions of across-gender relationships, as one participant angrily protested, 'if a woman works with male colleagues, there is a scandal. … There can be relationships without corruption!'

6. Empowerment Strategies

The women college heads claimed being rendered helpless by multiple forces and elements but they also engaged in attempts to maneuver the same or similar elements to empower themselves which have been manipulated to depower them [34]. The heads were located within and across multiple discourses which constituted their subjectivities, and their individual and collective positionings. Their

subject positions were multiple with inherent contradictions and dissensions. They brought their socio-political subjectivity to their professional positioning—to be regarded influential or powerless. The interplay was among discourses of family background, contacts, and political influence. Within colleges there were relationships with the students, staff, and senior bureaucracy, besides reputation and image as a teacher and academic, which extended to the wider society.

The power relations emerged as sites of struggles for dominance and resistance. Social and political contacts with the educational bureaucracy and political regimes added another dimension to the power play. Social obligations and relationships in the cultural context, political pressures and maneuverings in a particular Muslim society, and the structuring of the regional post-colonial education system contributed towards depowering the college heads. Interestingly, the same were manipulated for 'empowerment' through the production of 'reverse discourse'. Stephen Ball argues that:

> … managements, as localized practices, are micro-power structures and power relations that touch every aspect of organizational life and are serially related. They are special applications of power. They embody very specific mechanisms, procedures, and techniques with particular economic and political utility ([35], p. 165).

In this Muslim society, the traditional discourses surrounding teacher/teaching were still powerful, particularly regarding the relationship between the teacher and the taught. The institutional heads referred to themselves as *ustaad* or *moaullim* (teacher) showing a re-appropriation of the discourse. In spite of a declared work-load, many participating heads stated that they occasionally taught in the classes to 'establish contacts with the students', or probably to retain control of a powerful discourse. The positional powers denied in practice were counterbalanced by the authority acquired in a different space through another discourse, and manipulated for effective leadership.

Besides the integration of religious, social and professional discourses, a social net-work of contacts and relationships also contributed to counter the 'depowering' factors. This net-work comprised of familial relationships, socio-political contacts and the families of students, and was a specific feature of the regional socio-cultural scene [34]. An additional aspect was personal influence through the community of ex-students—their families, contacts, and job-positioning—the majority anxious to be of any service to an honored teacher (an integration of social and religious discourses). Significantly, these 'empowerment' strategies were accomplished through re-conceptualization of colleges as 'family space'. Threatened by the patriarchal norms, fear of character assassination, and surveillance in the public, women college heads appeared to feel relatively secure in the reconstruction of colleges as 'family'. The elements which acted as depowering forces in the professional positioning such as the concept of 'public space' were noticeably manipulated as empowerment strategies through this re-positioning of the space from the public into private. This practice invested the institutional heads with the 'de facto' authority accorded to 'motherhood' in the religious and some cultural discourses. Multiple references to the college heads as 'the parent', teachers as siblings/family, and students as children showed the construction of a metaphorical space of 'resistance' where 'depowering' in the 'public/professional' could be effectively countered.

In the regional culture, family served as an organizational model and as a site of social control. Within different societies and cultures, Muslim women have been confined to the 'private' through 'inclusionary', 'exclusionary' and 'segregatory' modes of control, reinforced by given discourses of

'veiling', *izzat*, segregation and *harim* [14,22,23,36]. What could not be made invisible was the status of women in the role of a mother and their rights as a member of the family, stated in the Quran and the Hadith:

> Because of the Quranic rights given to women, which protect their property, give them inalienable rights of inheritance, and ... allow them to keep their name ([21], p. 13).

In view of this comparative 'empowerment' of women in the 'private', they might have felt stronger to re-conceive colleges as 'family', positioning themselves in the role of 'mother' who is to be obeyed and honored as a passport to heaven. The integration of religious and social discourses invested them with a status and authority where 'gender discrimination could be resisted, seeing motherhood and sexuality as source of women's power' ([37], p. 155). The women participants' emphasis on reconceptualising colleges as 'family' reflected an alternate strategy supporting Fennell's claim that women 'have often expressed discomfort with structuralist perspectives of power and sought alternative theories of power' ([38], p. 100).

In the case of women college heads, over-emphasis on family and domestic role might have resulted from submission to dominant discourses disseminated by renowned religious scholars such as Maududi who recognize women's physical and mental equality and acquisition of knowledge but still strongly argues that 'her sphere of activity is home' ([39], p. 152). Or it might have stemmed from the Islamic discourse where 'private', conceived as *Harim,* is a place 'not to keep women in but to keep the intruders out' ([40], p. 65). However, it was also effectively availed to restrict male interference in the *Zanana* colleges, as claimed by a college head, 'Non-students infiltrate and create a crisis in *Mardana* (for men) colleges. This does not happen in girls colleges'. Interestingly, this protection from male infiltration provided them a space to perform effectively as professionals and it was a general observation that *Zanana* colleges were performing much better than male colleges.

Power relations emerge as two way phenomenon, reflecting a complex interplay of dependence and autonomy. The women college heads experienced depowering in the patriarchal Muslim society but also attempted empowerment through religious discourses of equality, motherhood and women's rights, thus suggesting that roles were not accepted in biddable and passive ways even in gendered cultures and practices. The apparent compliance with the social systems and power structures was in fact carefully negotiated, signifying that there were aspects that were accepted and others that were not, and others that were tolerated [41]. This highlighted the tensions between agency and structure, drawing attention to the complexity of role formation processes and power struggles. Giddens explains power as the capacity to achieve desired and intended outcomes ([42], p. 15). In spite of a proclaimed 'helplessness' and perceived challenges in exercising their leadership role, the participating heads did appear to exercise considerable power by availing cultural and belief systems to reproduce power relations that enhanced their positional power and enabled them to perform their professional roles.

The study suggested that religious status as a *moallam* (teacher) and positional or expert power as college head became virtually equal to zero power if not endorsed by cultural and belief systems. This was evidenced in the operational 'helplessness' of participating women college heads. The data unveiled intricate play of complex 'technologies of power', divesting the women college heads of *de jure* authority, and highlighted how these 'technologies' operated, and interacted with formation of practices, de-powering the women college heads in practice. However, another interesting finding was

how these female college heads availed the same sources of cultural and religious discourses to partially empower themselves as educational leaders, drawing attention to the power play located within societal culture and belief systems. The participating women college heads positioned in their own subjectivities, submitted to the discourses as well as reshaped them through resistance. The metaphorical shifting of sites, re-construction of *Zanana* college as 'family space', and political formulations of reverse discourses contributed to relative empowerment of the 'depowered' women college heads facilitating exercise of their professional roles.

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