

## **Enhancing School Safety through Women's Leadership: Insights from the Nepalese Community Schools**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explores the role of women's leadership in fostering safer and more inclusive School environments in Nepalese community Schools. Guided by two key questions, the research examines how gender-inclusive leadership strategies enhance School safety and what systemic reforms are needed to support women in these roles. Drawing on case studies from three Schools in Kathmandu Valley, complemented by a focus group discussion with five additional female Principals, the study highlights the lived experiences and day-to-day leadership practices of women in education.

Findings reveal that female Principals often adopt empathetic, collaborative, and student-centered approaches that enable them to respond effectively to complex issues such as gender-based violence, domestic abuse, and economic hardship. Many students, especially girls, felt more comfortable confiding in female leaders, leading to timely interventions and renewed access to education. These insights affirm the unique contributions of women's leadership, aligning with feminist and transformational leadership theories. The study calls for supportive

policies, mentorship, and professional development to empower more women to lead. By centering women's voices and experiences, this research contributes to the growing conversation on gender equity in educational leadership and underscores the urgent need for structures that support both student well-being and inclusive School governance.

**Keywords:** Community Schools, educational equity, feminist leadership, gender inclusivity, School safety, women's leadership

## Introduction

School safety and inclusivity are fundamental to fostering effective learning environments and holistic student development. Strong leadership plays a pivotal role in ensuring that Schools provide equitable educational experiences, yet many institutions continue to struggle with systemic barriers that hinder both safety and inclusivity. One significant challenge is the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions across educational sectors. Despite research demonstrating the positive impact of women in leadership roles, structural biases and societal norms continue to restrict their advancement (Brown et al., 2021; Shields, 2018).

The "glass ceiling" in educational leadership not only limits women's career progression but also obstructs the implementation of diverse leadership approaches that could more effectively address School safety and inclusivity. Traditional leadership structures, often hierarchical and male-centered, fail to adequately incorporate women's perspectives, leading to policies that do not sufficiently address student well-being or holistic safety measures (Blackmore, 2016; Coleman, 2011). Additionally, leadership development programs have historically emphasized technical skills while overlooking competencies such as emotional intelligence, culturally responsive leadership, and equity-driven governance (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These deficiencies in leadership preparation hinder efforts to create truly inclusive and safe School environments.

## Significance of women's leadership in education

Women's leadership in education is increasingly recognized as a transformative force capable of fostering safer, more equitable School environments. Female leaders often prioritize student welfare, collaborative decision-making, and holistic policy frameworks that support both educators and learners (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). However, systemic barriers—such as gender bias in institutional hiring practices and societal stereotypes—continue to limit women's full participation in leadership roles (Acker, 2012).

Empowering women in leadership requires deliberate strategies that integrate gender-responsive pedagogy, feminist leadership theories, and policy reforms. Studies indicate that establishing egalitarian leadership spaces facilitates transformational learning and strengthens women's ability to enact meaningful School reforms (Gelaye Debebe, 2010). Women Principals, for example, have successfully fostered improved educational outcomes through negotiation, coaching, and trust-building with teachers, parents, and communities (Muzvidziwa, 2014). Additionally, research highlights that child-friendly Schools led by

women enhance parental trust and cultivate environments centered on student well-being (Baharun et al., 2021).

To advance gender-inclusive leadership in education, institutions must establish structures that accommodate women's needs, provide adequate training, and cultivate a culture of equity and respect (Mehta & Sharma, 2014). Initiatives such as the LEO project, which equips women with leadership skills, promotes non-formal education for youth, and fosters gender-inclusive empowerment, demonstrate the necessity of gender-responsive leadership development programs. NGOs also play a crucial role in this process, offering resources and advocacy to support women's advancement in leadership and promoting inclusive decision-making models that benefit educational institutions worldwide.

### Objectives and research questions

This paper advocates for a transformative leadership framework that enables Schools to prioritize safety, empowerment, and holistic student development by integrating gender-sensitive strategies into leadership structures. Specifically, this study explores how nurturing women's leadership strengthens School safety and inclusivity, ensuring equitable learning environments for all students. The following research questions guide this investigation:

The study is guided by two key questions:

1. How do gender-inclusive leadership strategies employed by women in Nepalese Schools contribute to enhancing School safety and inclusivity?
2. What structural and developmental reforms are necessary to support and empower women in leading safer and more equitable School environments?

By addressing these questions, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equity in educational leadership and advocate for systemic changes that create stronger, more inclusive educational institutions.

### Literature Review

#### Persistent gender inequities in educational leadership

Despite significant progress in gender representation within the teaching profession, educational leadership remains marked by a persistent "glass ceiling" for women. Research consistently shows that women are underrepresented in senior leadership roles, constrained by systemic barriers such as ingrained gender biases, cultural stereotypes, and institutional limitations (Brown et al., 2021; Shields, 2018; UNICEF Innocenti, 2022). Traditional leadership structures, often hierarchical and male-dominated, tend to undervalue the unique strengths women bring to governance, including collaborative leadership, empathy, effective communication, and relationship-building (Blackmore, 2016; Coleman, 2011; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Empirical studies highlight that women leaders are more likely to promote teacher attendance, provide instructional guidance, and engage parents in monitoring student progress (Játiva et al., 2022; UNICEF Innocenti, 2022). Their leadership styles often prioritize inclusivity and stakeholder engagement, fostering environments where all voices are valued. However, these strengths are frequently overshadowed by challenges such as outdated policies,

lack of mentorship, and limited access to professional networks. In contexts like Nepal, traditional gender norms and perceptions of women as “second-class citizens” further hinder their advancement and influence in leadership roles.

#### **A Holistic imperative on school safety**

School safety encompasses more than physical security—it includes psychological well-being and social inclusivity. Research identifies key safety concerns such as bullying, gender-based violence, mental health, and the need for positive School climates (UNESCO, n.d.; Young, 2010). Effective safety strategies involve comprehensive policies, teacher training, student awareness, and community engagement. However, genuine safety requires a holistic approach that addresses systemic inequities and fosters environments where all students feel protected, respected, and empowered.

#### **Intersection of women’s leadership and school safety**

While both women’s leadership and School safety are well-researched independently, their intersection remains underexplored. Emerging literature suggests indirect linkages: women leaders’ emphasis on collaboration, communication, and community engagement contributes to safer School environments by strengthening relationships and promoting holistic development (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Muzvidziwa, 2014; Baharun et al., 2021). Women-only training programs have also been shown to foster transformational learning, equipping women to challenge norms and implement inclusive reforms (Gelaye Debebe, 2010).

Gender-responsive leadership is increasingly recognized as essential for reducing gender-based violence and promoting equity in Schools (UNESCO, n.d.). However, the direct causal pathways through which women’s leadership translates into measurable improvements in School safety, such as reduced bullying or enhanced reporting mechanisms, remain largely implied rather than empirically substantiated.

#### **Theoretical framework**

This study draws on a multi-theoretical framework to explore the relationship between women’s leadership and School safety:

- Transformational Leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, and individualized support—traits that align with women’s collaborative and motivational leadership styles.
- Feminist Leadership Theories advocate for shared power, empathy, and social justice, supporting inclusive practices that address systemic safety issues.
- Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner) situates School safety within interconnected systems, highlighting how women leaders can influence these layers holistically.
- Feminist Pedagogy promotes student-centered learning and inclusivity, fostering environments of respect and empowerment.
- Leadership Theory, including distributed and servant leadership, reinforces the value of collaboration and community engagement, core to women’s leadership approaches.

These frameworks collectively illuminate the mechanisms through which women’s leadership can enhance School safety across physical, psychological, and social dimensions.

**Policy context of safe schools' declaration**

The Safe Schools Declaration, endorsed by numerous UN member states, underscores the need to protect students and educators from violence, particularly in conflict-affected regions. It emphasizes the importance of uninterrupted education for girls, who are disproportionately affected by School-related violence. UNICEF further advocates for gender-sensitive policies, asserting that investing in girls' education fosters economic growth, reduces inequality, and builds resilient societies.

**Gaps in the literature**

Despite suggestive evidence, several critical gaps persist:

- Direct Causal Pathways: Few empirical studies quantify how women's leadership strategies directly impact School safety indicators.
- Contextual Specificity: Research is limited in diverse cultural contexts, particularly in countries like Nepal, where gender norms shape leadership dynamics.
- Beyond Representation: There is a lack of focus on how to equip women leaders to apply their strengths to operational areas like School safety.
- Lived Experience: More in-depth qualitative research is needed to capture the nuanced experiences of women leaders navigating safety challenges and implementing inclusive policies.

This study seeks to address these gaps through a qualitative exploration of women's leadership in Nepalese Schools. By focusing on case studies and capturing the lived experiences of women Principals, it aims to illuminate the direct pathways through which empowered female leadership contributes to safer and more equitable learning environments.

**Rationale of the study**

This research is necessary to address the persistent underrepresentation of women in educational leadership and the critical need for safer School environments. By exploring the intersection of women's leadership and School safety, this study aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform practice, policy, and future research. The findings have the potential to highlight effective leadership strategies, promote gender-sensitive reforms, and ultimately enhance the well-being and safety of students in Nepalese Schools. This study is not without limitations. The small sample size and qualitative design limit generalizability. While the focus on Nepal provides rich, contextual insight, the findings may not reflect experiences in other regions or cultures. Future research should employ larger, cross-regional samples and explore the intersectionality of gender, leadership, and safety in different educational settings.

**Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative case study approach within an interpretivist framework to examine the lived experiences of women in educational leadership and their influence on School safety. By focusing on three community high Schools in Kathmandu Valley led by women Principals, the research seeks to uncover the complexities of gender-inclusive leadership in School governance. Additionally, a focus group discussion (FGD) with five

women Principals from other community Schools provides broader insights into leadership strategies and institutional challenges, enriching the study with diverse perspectives.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a varied representation of women in leadership roles across community Schools. The study engaged three women Principals leading high School community Schools in Kathmandu Valley, providing firsthand accounts of their leadership experiences, challenges, and approaches to fostering safer Schools. Additionally, five women Principals from other community Schools participated in a focus group discussion, offering broader perspectives on systemic barriers and effective strategies for promoting gender-inclusive leadership in education. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of leadership dynamics, School safety policies, and the broader implications of gender-sensitive governance within the educational sector. Participants varied in years of leadership experience, School size, and socio-cultural backgrounds, allowing for nuanced perspectives on leadership, School safety, and inclusivity.

Data collection utilized semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to gain deep insights into leadership experiences. Interview protocols focused on School safety policies, leadership strategies, and gender-based challenges in educational governance, while FGDs facilitated collaborative reflection on best practices and systemic barriers faced by women in leadership. To ensure validity and reliability, interview and discussion guides were reviewed by experts in educational leadership, ensuring alignment with research objectives. Ethical measures, including informed consent and confidentiality agreements, safeguarded participant anonymity. The data collection process spanned three months, allowing for iterative analysis and contextual refinement to enhance the study's depth and accuracy.

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and recurring themes across interviews and focus group discussions. The coding process focused on three key areas: leadership impact, safety strategies, and systemic challenges in School governance. This analytical approach ensured alignment with the study's research questions, maintaining coherence between the collected data and relevant theoretical frameworks, allowing for deeper insights into gender-inclusive leadership practices and their role in fostering safer Schools.

The research followed strict ethical standards to protect participants and ensure integrity. Informed consent was obtained before participation, allowing individuals to understand the study and their role. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through secure data storage and coded identifiers to protect personal information. Discussions were conducted in a safe and supportive environment, ensuring participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences, particularly on sensitive leadership challenges. These measures reflect a commitment to ethical research and respect for all contributors.

## Findings and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed that female School Principals employed a variety of leadership strategies to enhance School safety and inclusivity. These included collaborative decision-making, fostering open communication, and cultivating a caring, supportive School culture.



*“I believe in involving teachers and parents in decision-making processes. This collaborative approach helps in creating a safe and inclusive environment for students” (Participant A).*

These practices aligned with a transformational leadership style, which emphasizes participatory decision-making and community engagement as mechanisms for School improvement.

### **Cultural and societal factors**

Cultural and societal norms were found to shape both the opportunities and challenges faced by women in School leadership. Participants shared experiences of resistance rooted in traditional gender roles, which often impeded the implementation of safety measures.

*“In our society, women leaders often face resistance and skepticism. It takes a lot of effort to overcome these barriers and prove our capabilities” (Participant B).*

Despite these challenges, participants expressed resilience and a commitment to transforming School environments through inclusive leadership.

### **Gender-sensitive policies**

The study revealed that gender-sensitive policies were central to fostering safety and equity in Schools. Participants reported proactively implementing measures to address gender-based violence and promote a safe atmosphere for both students and staff.

*“We have implemented policies that specifically address the needs of female students and staff. These policies are essential for creating a safe and supportive environment” (Participant C).*

### **Responsive and empathetic interventions**

Several Principals recounted cases where their presence and approachability as female leaders enabled students to disclose sensitive personal issues. These narratives highlight the crucial role women leaders play in safeguarding student well-being.

*“A girl shared with me that she was being sexually harassed at the house where she worked as a helper. She said it was easier to talk to me because I was a woman. I investigated the case, visited her workplace, spoke with her guardians, and informed her actual parents. The problem was resolved, and the girl was protected” (Participant D).*

In another School, a principal intervened after a student stopped attending School due to domestic violence.

*“I noticed a girl had been absent for many days. When I visited her home, I found that her father, after drinking, was abusing the mother and also the girl. We engaged the ward chair and the community to resolve the issue. The girl resumed School after that” (Participant E).*

Another compelling case involved a Grade 11 student who had dropped out of School to support her family:

*“She was working as a laborer to feed her siblings and ill mother. She was an excellent student. We offered her a part-time job at School and supported her continued education. Later, we also assisted her in her higher studies” (Participant F).*

These narratives reinforce the importance of having women in leadership roles, especially in addressing sensitive cases of abuse, marginalization, and educational discontinuity.

## Results

The findings illuminate how female School leaders play a pivotal role in fostering safe, inclusive, and empathetic learning environments. Their leadership strategies—rooted in collaboration, communication, and care—are directly linked to improved student well-being and School climate. These women often serve not only as administrators but also as trusted confidants and advocates for vulnerable students.

The evidence clearly suggests that female leadership enhances responsiveness to issues of safety, abuse, and neglect. The ability of students to approach female Principals with personal and sensitive problems underscores the need for gender representation in leadership.

## Comparison with previous research

These findings corroborate existing literature that identifies the positive impacts of women's leadership in education. Studies have shown that female School heads are more likely to ensure teacher presence, engage parents, and uphold School discipline (UNICEF Innocenti, 2022; Játiva et al., 2022). However, the current study adds to this body of knowledge by offering qualitative, context-specific evidence from Nepal, showing how gender-inclusive leadership contributes to safeguarding students and ensuring continued education, especially for vulnerable girls. The stories of intervention in cases of abuse and economic hardship demonstrate how women's leadership not only reflects transformational qualities but also embodies feminist leadership values—grounded in empathy, justice, and student advocacy.

## Conclusion and Implication

This study explored the role of women's leadership in enhancing School safety and inclusivity in Nepalese community Schools. Guided by two key research objectives: (1) to examine how gender-inclusive leadership strategies employed by women contribute to safer and more inclusive School environments, and (2) to identify structural and developmental reforms necessary to empower women in educational leadership, the study offers meaningful insights into the gendered dynamics of School governance in Nepal.

Findings from interviews and focus group discussions with female School Principals revealed that women leaders actively employ empathetic, collaborative, and student-centered leadership practices that enhance School safety and inclusivity. The participants shared real-life cases in which their gender identity and leadership position enabled students, especially girls, to disclose sensitive issues such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and economic hardship. These disclosures often led to timely interventions, including home visits, engagement with local authorities, and School-based support mechanisms that safeguarded students' rights and well-being.

These findings not only illustrate the practical contributions of female Principals but also highlight the transformative potential of gender-sensitive leadership. The study reaffirms and extends existing theoretical frameworks, particularly transformational and feminist leadership



theories, by illustrating how values of empathy, social justice, and advocacy are enacted in everyday School leadership. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that female leaders play a critical role in addressing gender-based challenges in educational settings, often serving as trusted advocates and protectors for vulnerable students. Promoting women in educational leadership is therefore not just a question of gender equity, but a necessary strategy for creating safer, more inclusive, and more effective Schools. Supporting female Principals through structural reforms, such as gender-responsive leadership development, institutional mentorship programs, and inclusive policy implementation, can contribute to broader educational and social transformation.

### **Theoretical implications**

These findings contribute to transformational and feminist leadership theories, emphasizing that women in leadership positions bring unique relational and community-building capacities. They challenge traditional, hierarchical models of leadership and demonstrate that inclusive, empathetic leadership fosters systemic School improvement and safety.

### **Practical implications**

The study offers several practical takeaways for educators, School administrators, and stakeholders. Promoting women to leadership roles is not only an equity issue but also a strategic imperative for student safety and School inclusivity. Training programs should emphasize empathetic leadership, trauma-informed practices, and community collaboration.

### **Policy implications**

There is a pressing need for policies that actively promote women's leadership in Schools. The key recommendations include:

- Establishing mentorship and leadership development programs for aspiring women leaders.
- Mandating gender-sensitive safety policies in Schools.
- Integrating trauma and abuse response training in professional development programs.

These policy interventions will create more protective and inclusive learning environments for students.

### **Future research**

While this study provides rich qualitative insights into women's leadership and School safety, several areas remain open for further exploration. Future studies should consider:

**Scaling the research:** Expanding the sample size and including diverse geographic and socio-economic School settings across Nepal and beyond would enhance generalizability.

**Comparative leadership studies:** Research comparing male and female leadership strategies within similar contexts could help illuminate the unique strengths and challenges of gendered leadership styles.

**Longitudinal impact:** Long-term studies could assess the sustained effects of gender-inclusive leadership on School safety, student well-being, and educational attainment.

**Stakeholder perspectives:** Including the voices of students, parents, and community members would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership is perceived and experienced across stakeholder groups. By addressing these avenues, future research can build upon the current study's foundation and contribute to a more nuanced and evidence-based discourse on gender equity, leadership, and School safety in the Global South.

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