From Fighting to Flying: Women Leadership in Private Schools of Kathmandu Valley

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Abstract

This article unveils the stories of women who have been standing as leaders in private schools of Kathmandu Valley. The purpose of the study was to uncover how women leaders faced challenges on their leadership journey, and how they coped with those challenges. Interpretivism was adopted as the research paradigm using narrative research design. Three women leaders from private schools of Kathmandu Valley were selected purposively and the open-ended questions were used to assemble their narratives. The narratives of the women were unfolded through our engagement in the process of storytelling and reflection. The study unveiled that the women, who appear to be sophistically handling leadership positions in their particular organizations, are hovered around by different challenges. Moreover, their stories present the challenges they have gone through so as to reach where they are; and how they have applied mechanisms to cope with the challenges that appeared on their way. The challenges on the women's way, as suggested by their stories, were connected to the discourse of gender while they had utilized their willpower and passion, professional integrity and altruism as mechanisms to cope with the challenges. Nonetheless, the study even hints that some challenges are tough to be bounced back since they are deeply rooted to social mentalities.

Keywords: Equality, social justice, subjectivity, narrative

Introduction

This section sets background of the study. Starting with our inspiration to conduct the study, it presents purpose of the study and research questions. Besides, the study also provides an overview of women and leadership, and elucidates the gap pertaining to the agenda of women leadership in educational landscape.

Setting the Stage

She stands, smiles, moves ahead in heels

She conveys, convinces, says recklessly what she feels!

Standing- says is an epitome, resting upon bed of roses

Avoiding what she has to be, confidence is what she possesses!

A wo-man, born not to be a man!

A wo-man, never to be a man!!

My stories are the hymns I composed on my mine

Of the thorns that I was given with, to roses that I converted into divine!

Patience, compassion, confidence, feeling what she feels

Assembling all hurdles with care, I do stand on heels!

A WOMAN, born to be a WOMAN!

A WOMAN, I move firmly, I'm a WOMAN!!!

(First Author)

The lines I (first author) scribbled above elucidate my (first author) stance as an educational leader, and the narratives that laid foundation to the journey I traced so as to stand, and be applauded as a woman worth being followed. Utilizing media res as rhetorical device, I present how my positionality of being a confident and determined individual is perceived as a paradox in itself, and move to my journey that started with a number of judgments, hinderances and diversions. It was the first time at the age of 22 when I had openly violated the protocol defined by my in-laws and decided firmly to come out. "*Do you think you are doing right?*", asked my husband with great confidence. "*Yes!!!*" I replied. With their eyes appallingly open, his parents started staring at me as I was putting on my shoes. The shoes were not just shoes for me; the particular pair of heels was something that I had been longing for years; for a decade, I must say. After continuous debates within myself, I had made up my mind to love myself, free myself, and come out of the bondage of suffocating obligations. And the pair of heels had stood as something with which I was going to start the campaign of change! I knew the world would find me in the

dilemma of 'fight or flight'. However, since I had to fight and fly, I decided not to step back. I had to make a change to acquire my real self, and I moved ahead!

My experience says that being acknowledged as a leader is something many individuals desperately dream of. The dream of leadership, in the words of Bennis (2009), is related to power, money, and fame. For many, leading is all about authority as leadership connotes to making decisions and executing them (Snowden & Boone, 2007). The same relatedness, since ages, has led to bypassing women from leadership discourse. The bypass appears apparently in the perception that unlike men who are agentic in nature, women are highly communal and lack controlling and decisive capability (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). However, the attempt of bypassing my stance from leadership premise appeared in a different way.

The way I stood in heels, and exhibited outspokenness led many towards cynicism that my stance must have sprung out of the bed of roses. Amid the encouragement I showered to my pupils to keep moving no matter what, I received the perceptions that I must have come out of a cocoon and start preaching 'striving to thrive'! These remarks, at times, made me feel like yelling and letting the world know how I walked along the path covered with thorns and rocks so as to reach under the canopy of acknowledgement. But as I listened to my co-author's narration of his sister's journey to being established as an early childhood practitioner, and the judgments she has been going through at present, we got a sense that the story of fighting and flying might not be my story or the story of his sister alone.

With a consensus that challenges and realities form a basic discourse of life, and the definition of these realities comes out more individually (Khan & MacEachen, 2021), we started our research journey. The journey started with review of literatures that hinted to us that people may merely describe the challenges of women's leadership with much alliteration but cannot feel the real obstacles that each woman feels realistically (Elmuti et al., 2009). While making attempts to climb higher, I sensed that becoming a successful leader in society is challenging, and it is more challenging when you are a woman, a young woman. The challenges, however, are again subjective. Being a young woman activist, Malala faced immense hardships (Lodice, 2020). She, in a sense, rose from death to succeed at her young age. Bidhya Devi Bhandari (the first woman president of Nepal)'s leadership journey in the similar way, is of her kind and has emerged from her context with many adversities starting with stereotypes to a continuous judgment of her roles (Upreti et al., 2020). The subjectivity we sensed in stories of Malala and Bidhya Devi Bhandari stimulated our enthusiasm to listen to stories of other women who have earned acknowledgement as successful educational leaders; and we ended up with a consensus to unveil narratives pertaining to leadership journey of women who are running private schools in Kathmandu Valley.

The purpose of the study was to unveil the narratives of women who are leading private schools in Kathmandu Valley. It basically focused on uncovering what challenges women had to go through, and how they coped with challenges in the pursuit of leadership. To fulfill the purpose of the study, the study was guided by two research questions:

1. How do the women, who are leading private schools in Kathmandu Valley, narrate the challenges they came across in their leadership journey?

2. How do they articulate coping with the challenges so as to attain leadership?

Literature Review

Women and Leadership: An Overview

The discourse of women and their positionality in leadership has earned immense popularity since ages. The popularity appears apparently in the portrayal of women like Rani Laxmi Bai from India, who is celebrated as defender to her state's sovereignty (Wolpert, 2004 as cited in Lundin, 2015) and Joan of Arc from France whose incorporation of leadership into her pious and visionary power had become threating force to England and France during the fifteenth century (Ha, 2017). Amid this portrayal of women in leadership landscape, the question of whether qualitative differences exist between male and female leaders (Gipson et al., 2017) fascinated us. So as to fathom the mystery in this question, we reviewed studies that were made on women leaders, and understood that these studies have focused mostly on stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination to define gender differences in the discourse of leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heliman, 1983; Rudman & Glick, 2001 as cited in Gipson et al., 2017).

In our attempt of understanding the discourse of women and leadership, we turned the pages that connected to origin of leadership theories. These pages took us to the concept of 'Great Man', which, in Ololube's observation stated to masculinity or military leadership (Ololube, 2013 as cited in Dwivedi, 2016). The connotation of leadership to masculinity, however, was challenged by the findings of meta- analysis of studies comparing leadership styles of men and women that showed women to be more inter- personally- oriented and democratic compared to men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

When it comes to representation of men and women in leadership roles, there comes the assumption that men and women tend to act like polar opposites where women lack the qualities prevalent in men (Heilman, 2012). This stereotype about women that restricted them in attaining space in influential leadership echoed even in the former president of America, Richard Nixon's remarks on why he thought women

not deserving to be appointed in the Supreme Court as he stated, "I don't think a woman should be in any government job whatsoever mainly because they are erratic. And emotional. Men are erratic and emotional, too, but the point is a woman is more likely to be" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 62.).

Struggling amidst these stereotypes, some women were found to be developing and adopting masculinity traits (Drydakis et al., 2017) so as to get identified in the landscape of leadership. But at the same time, the women leaders when adopting masculine leadership characteristics are often stated to have undergone judgement with negative connotations (Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007). The greater paradox in viewing women leadership, as Eagly and Carli (2007) articulate, is when the women opt for performing male role with her feminine attributes, they are perceived to be too emotional and less assertive.

It is the truism that men and women are not born with masculinity or femininity as genetic inheritance. Despite this, masculine personality traits are perceived to be important human capital characteristics (Budig, 2002; Franzway et al., 2009 as cited in Drydakis et al., 2017). This assumption in the form of gender inequality is visible across the globe when it comes to senior leadership positions while representation of women in businesses leadership, as stated by Thornton (2016, as cited in Gipson et al., 2017) is even low.

Education as Premise Accommodating Women Leadership

While we were reviewing women's stance in leadership discourse, we came across the realization that women's positionality in leadership is embellished with sufferings and challenges. This led us to probe upon how the women leaders attempted to rise to leadership amid the afore-stated challenges. Hence, we reviewed the literature on women and their journey to leadership roles. In this course, we came across the agreement prevailing from the past that women have to go through relatively more challenges and barriers to reach to leadership positions (Eagly et al. 1995). One of the barriers was assumed to have been due to the perception about women being more communal than men who are more agentic and capable of taking charge and being in control (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Amidst this, nonetheless, the women were reported to have attempted to rise through application of a number of initiatives.

Discussing on how the women have attempted to rise, Subramanian et al. (2016) have mentioned that with the evolution of human society, women started acquiring the leadership traits such as ambition, self-reliance and assertiveness so as to come out to compete with men for all positions in society. The adoption, nonetheless, was reported to have not lessened the adversities, for if the women

displayed assertion, they would be criticized for lacking communion and even reduce their chances of getting job or advancing career (Eagly & Carli, 2007). On contrary to this, the women were supposed to have substantial advantage in the organizations like education and social service (Eagly et al., 1995) since the job like teaching, reflecting in the words of Subramanian et al. (2016) is perceived as aligning with their family roles.

While investigating upon how the women have tried to rise in leadership position, we came across repeated remarks about their intentions of reducing the gender stereotypes as feminine (Eagly & Johnson, 1990) while working. However, making an alter in their leadership styles, which I find relatable with their intention of reducing the stereotype as feminine was reported to have resulted pressure and mental illness (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). On contrary to this, modesty as a communal attribute was experienced to have contributed in describing a woman's success which reflects in Eagly and Carli (2007)'s reference to Linguistic Professor Deborah Tannen's story.

We even got acquainted with the concept of 'education as the organization benefitting women leadership'. We understood 'teaching as feminine' was considered as strategy of women to rise to leadership. This was because teaching was considered to ideologically link women's domestic role to her career as a schoolteacher, where she is expected to perform her natural job of extending her motherhood (Ullah, 2016). In fact, the preference of women in academia was shared in many parts of the world including North America, South America, Europe, South Pacific and Asia, where women were reported to have constituted up to 80 percent of primary school teaching (UNESCO, 2004). Coming precisely to the context of Nepal, the preference of women leaders in academics has reflected apparently in Acharya's (2014) study of Nepalese context which indicated that women are more preferred to be assigned for taking care of primary level students and public relations.

While elaborating why the women are mostly chosen for school education, Pruit (2014) argues that school teaching is preferred more for the women since they are considered to be different from the males who often fail to be nurturers and caretakers of young children. And since the well documented gender stereotype femininity finds women to be more nurturing (Subramanian, 2018) in nature, exhibition of stereotypically feminine qualities, as Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade (2015) could lead her to leadership since the qualities as cooperation, mentoring and collaboration are considered of a great importance at present. Keeping together the recounting on why women are chosen much in academia, we could understand that, the belief that a woman fits well in expectational framework of the society keeps her sought for as an educational leader.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study follows a blend of feminist approach as theoretical foundation. It addresses the challenges women leaders have been going through to ascertain their subjectivity as relational beings in society and at the same time, exhibits the strategies women leaders demonstrate to cope with the challenges and ascertain their stance as leaders in educational landscape.

Borrowing the lens of feminism, the paper looks into the social challenges that the women leaders have to go through as they initiate stepping out to articulate their choice and these challenges often get intensified in form of violence and threat. And as most feminists claim, violence and the threat of violence violate women's dignity (Shakti, 2017); making women do what others want or reducing women's sphere of activity to avoid those adversities. In some cases, threats even fracture the self and take from women their sense of self-respect, thereby restricting their capability to rise above expected stereotypical roles (Brison, 1997). Similarly, as Butler (2006) puts forward acknowledging Catherine MacKinnon, as sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, sexual hierarchy takes the form of gender and ultimately consolidates gender roles. Determination of gender roles, in this sense, influences the relational being of women.

Methods and Procedures

The study has adopted interpretivism as research paradigm while the research design is narrative. Choosing interpretivism as research paradigm springs out of our experience regarding women's stance to be contributed by socio-cultural, political, economic, ethnic, and gender values (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) pertaining to our communities which are different and subjective. Furthermore, as Gergen (2009) defines, we have been experiencing women's positionality to be relational to the context where they have been living. Though both of us experienced leadership and challenges in relation to it, the challenges faced by the one was different from the other. This difference made us realize that realities are as per individuals (Scotland, 2012), and the women's knowledge about challenges to their leadership journey and the coping mechanisms are more related to how they see and interpret them (Amzat et al., 2015). So as to unravel the women's subjective ontologies on women and leadership, we adopted narrative inquiry as our epistemological journey.

We adopted narrative inquiry as research methodology as it allowed us to explore women leaders' stories (Creswell, 2008) so as to generate understanding and insights (Saldana, 2013) about their leadership experiences. Furthermore, since the methodology provided us with a framework to probe upon how the women leaders experienced the world around them in the form of the world that is depicted by their

stories and lived experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007), the methodology was of practical interest for us.

Keeping in mind our position as narrative inquirers, we used interview as method to extract stories of our research participants, Bibechana, Karuna and Samjhauta. These participants were selected purposively which is considered by Merriam (1998) as an appropriate strategy in qualitative research. Furthermore, the participants were selected from private schools of Kathmandu Valley since the place was viable to both of us, and we could have frequent engagement with the participants.

We were aware that narrative inquiries begin with storytelling (Clandinin & Huber, 2014). Hence, we encouraged our participants to articulate their experiences in the form of storytelling. While encouraging them, however, we kept probing questions so that our research participants would get motivated to narrate their stories (Clandinin, 2013), aligning to the central discourse of our study. The questions were open ended in nature, while we tried our best to reflect upon our stories so that we and our participants could co-construct knowledge together (Duncan, 2017). Furthermore, we took into account sociality, temporality and place so that credibility (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) of our study could be maintained. Simultaneously, we followed the ethical guidelines of confidentiality, respect and originality throughout our research journey.

Results

This section of paper uncovers narratives of the research participants. Furthermore, insights generated from the narratives are also presented in this section.

From Experiencing Otherness to Reaching the Self: Bibechana's Leadership Journey

The stories of the research participants were inspiring to us. Tracing journey through hurdles, they had established themselves as exemplified figures. During our visit to the schools they led, we could hear a lot of acknowledgements about them. And when we talked about struggles with them, they responded that struggles make people innovative and strong. Recounting the proverb, "Where there is will, there is way", the participants stated that only those who can turn the challenges as strategy to be pushed live in the hearts of others. They agreed that during challenges, one learns real meaning of effort and determination; and only the one who creates culture of support and solidarity amid as coping mechanism stands as leader in true sense. They had experienced the stories of being treated as others, and they narrated their stories in their own ways. Among the three participants, Bibechana put forth her story as mentioned below:

When I look at myself at present, I find myself blooming from the bosom of myself. It's the outcome of desperation, patience, and consistent effort that have ultimately supported my flight from the structure of confinement toward the horizon of my real self. It was a time when I used to long to come out. I used to come out, of course, but it was not the way I had dreamt of. (Personal Communication, 2022 June 23)

Bibechana appeared as a poet to us. We were amazed by her rhetoric. Her story hinted that she had struggled to get her real self, and she considered it as her leadership journey. She further added,

Others could see an unmarried girl coming out of the walls and enjoying complete liberty. Owning a school and monitoring others seemed fascinating. But only I know what I have paid to make this flight. I have fought for the flight. I have gone through a wide array of challenges, most of them disturbing. I have faced serious ruptures resulting due to stereotypes, judgment, and the resistance of my community to define my roles as a woman cum leader. I was constantly suggested to find a good house and settle, since I was ultimate going to be other's possession one day! Even my dad and mom were continuously told to stop thinking of investing on my school since I would definitely be other, and I could never pay the debt of my parents! Otherness had become a common discourse in my household, and it disturbed me a lot.

The way Bibechana stated of otherness was very heart-touching. In her story, we could reflect our own stories since we had seen and experienced disapproval to invest to what a daughter does because she has to go to others' house. But we were equally eager to learn how she got to establish herself as a leader of a reputed school of Kathmandu by walking through such path. We wanted to learn of her coping mechanism to which she replied,

It was difficult to hold, of course. However, passion was something that encouraged me, and the same passion inspired me to adopt and adapt to different strategies so, that I could bounce back from the challenges. I give credit to my passion to stand as an educational leader. (Personal Communication, 2022 June 23)

For Bibechana, a woman coming out of the household is often seen as a free woman. However, there are several unseen challenges on the way as a woman dream to be a leader. These challenges arise from stereotypes created regarding the role of women to the limited access of women to financial investment to establish themselves (Balachandra et al., 2017). Among these, the accepted role that society

assumes from women has been a primary barrier to the ability of women to secure educational leadership positions (Farmer, 1993). Similarly, Valerio (2009) illustrates some metaphors that are used to describe the barriers that come in front of them as they strive to be leaders, referring to them as Glass Ceiling. To come out of these adversities, being resilient was chosen as one of the best techniques (Luthar et al., 2015). Resilience, however, sometimes may need to come out in the collective form. Teamwork, a distributive type of leadership, and good networking among women leaders pursuing the similar goal of leadership and supporting each other with their expertise (Harris & Spillane, 2008) may ease the flight one takes from the bondage of others to the world of self.

Perplexed amid Authority or Compassion: Unveiling Karuna's Story

Leadership, in general, is identified as a social influence process where the leader seeks the voluntary participation of subordinates in his efforts of achieving organizational goals (Omolayo, 2007). As I believe, the discourse of leadership is about standing as an inspiration, monitoring, and consequently bringing about transformation in those who are being led by us. In this sense, a leader as a transformer starts from him/ herself and participates in collective decision-making abilities and shared influences of subordinates in the effort of achieving organizational goals; and in this process, the leader finds the input of all team members equally worthy and motivates each employee within the organization with due importance (Anit, 2006). However, when it comes to leadership, it is regarded as something more about 'masculinity' with attributes of rigidity rather than the implication of attributes of a leader as a compassionate monitor. In the line with these views, my research participant Karuna expressed her experiences as mentioned below:

> I must say, I was fortunate enough to have got my mother as my role model from the very days of my school. She was the one who showed me what change I could make being a woman. I reflected upon her guidance each moment and ultimately established myself as a leader. However, leadership as a discourse, itself creates challenges for us through the acquisition of leadership is perceived as the attainment of emancipation from adversities for women. Very often, I have found myself in a state of dilemma while defining what leadership is. I have found it is defined as authority and power. Leadership brings position, of course! But compassion is what I believe to be one of the essentials of leadership and compassion is what is innate that I possess! However, the same notion is taken otherwise and my role is defined as a submissive, sublime leader. (Personal Communication, 2022 June 21)

Karuna further added, "Being a leader, you exercise power; and it is the most fascinating part about leadership" (Personal Communication, 2022 June 21). Regular remarks about what leadership is might seem enigmatic to many people since it is often defined in terms of power (Kolzow, 2014). A similar notion was echoed in Karuna's remarks too, who expressed how leadership was explained as a paradox in course of her experience as a leader.

As the words of my participant portrayed, a woman, who is still considered the subject of patriarchal domination and male chauvinism is subjected to defined characteristics of sublimity and objectivity. She is judged on the ground of social capital that she is enriched with. More specifically, the social relations facilitate the social values, norms, trust, and networks for a common purpose (Bourdeu & Claude, 1990), ultimately facilitating best leadership practices. I believe in social attachment among peers and colleagues as an attribute of leadership which even simplifies the relationship for a specific purpose to rescue from complexities.

Unaccomplished Journey: A Quest to Move from Equality to Equity

What we see something as equal treatment may not provide the required opportunities all time. And if we have to talk about leadership, we would say its definition has itself been patriarchal. There exists discrimination even when we see that men and women are treated equally, and this discrimination is visible from the very days of investment in a child's education (e.g., Pasqua, 2005). Similarly, a woman, from a very early age is taught to remain submissive and subtle. Connecting it, Samjhauta expressed:

> My brother is one year younger than me. But we were in the same grade as our school, and I was supposed to be protected by him. When we completed our high school in eastern terai, we opted to move to Kathmandu. My brother wanted to do engineering, and so did I. However, my parents wanted me to choose to nurse since it would be more subtle. It was something that I found discriminatory amidst equality that my parents often boasted about. I completed my bachelor's degree in nursing, and now I work as an educational leader on one of the nursing campuses. I grew up dreaming to be a civil engineer and ended up serving as a nurse! (Personal Communication, 2022 June 20)

Most of the festivals that we observe talk about safeguarding women. When we look into our festivals such as *Bhaitika* (Bhattarai & Devkota, 2018) or *Rakshyabandhan* (Howard, 2005), we realize that it is always the brother who vows to protect the sister. Turning the pages of religious scriptures and history, we get to know that it is always the male who is supposed to be safeguarding the

female. As stated by Manu (Manusmriti as cited in Gupta, 2016), "*Balye pitorvashay tishteth panee grhasay yownay, putranam bhartre pretay na bjait stri swatantr tam.*" It means that girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under the custody of their husbands when married, and under the custody of their sons when being widows (Patwari, 2011). This notion of safeguarding and limiting women and her premises has ultimately resulted in her lesser exposure to the world of confidence and limited her experience in leadership practices. There are specific dimensions to what society expects a girl to do. As Samjhauta stated, a girl is encouraged to groom herself as a subtle girl, and in this context, it's too difficult to find her a confident educational leader as she grows up. She wanted to be an engineer but her family wanted her to be a nurse. This is probably because, the family believed that a girl cannot be competent enough to be an engineer (Fouad et al., 2017; Robinson & McIlwee, 1991) but being a nurse is what is meant to be with the way she would be nurturing her entire life (Holton, 1984). Her access to nursing here might be considered as the outcome of equal treatment between her and her brother, but it is not equitable as my participant had dreamt of. She has been applying the strategy of persuasion and self-determination to get her quest to move from *equality* to *equity*. However, her resilience has got concealed, and she ended up leaving the castle of her dream unfurnished.

Discussion

Women constitute more than half of the total population of the world numbering 51.04% out of the total population in the context of our country, Nepal according to the census of 2021 (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2022). The composition indicates the female positioning is higher than males. It even signposts that education and empowerment guaranteed to women can lead to the enhancement of the majority of the population (Bayeh, 2016), while the success of women popping out of magazines and newspapers speaks of the prosperity of the nation. It is indisputable that women play a pivotal role in uplifting the status of the nation along with an improvement in the human condition (Bayeh, 2016). Emphasizing the same role that women play in enhancing the human condition, Margaret Atieno Ogola, one of the greatest African Heroine stated the importance of women as the heart of family and the family is the milestone of civilization. Ogola further argues that there is a need to improve women's well-being and enhance their inherent abilities and gifts (Mishra & Tiwari, 2016). However, the stories of our research participants indicated to us that the agenda of uplifting women's status is still less prioritized even in cities and educated families like that of Bibechana.

Discussing what traits a woman possesses, Mishra and Tiwari (2016) stated that woman is a creative, development, and peacemaking force. Furthermore, if

we analyze leadership practices made by women, we can find the history of Nepal evident to it. Anti Rana Movements (1947-1950) and the movements during the 1970s provide some examples of participation of women in national transformation irrespective of the bondage created by the society for them (Yami, 2007 as cited in Rai, 2015). Even the studies have said that women possess the better capability to redefine the rules of business and leadership besides contributing to the socio-cultural dimensions. And when we kept the stories of Bibechana, Karuna and Samjauta with the aforementioned examples, we could understand that women leaders are capable of leading the organizations in more rehabilitative, participative and comprehensive manner. Amid this too, the women had faced judgements and stereotypes which they considered to be instigator to limiting their capabilities (Pierotti et al., 2022).

The women leaders were proud of being women. But as they stated, they were viewed as wo-men at their familial and professional presmises. They recounted their existence to have been assured with the existence of men while their performance was judged at the cost of absence of masculinity. This recounting aligns with Beauvoir et al.'s (1949) condemnation of system that considers that a man's physique makes sense in and of itself, but a woman's body appears to be devoid of meaning on its own. Furthermore, as Beauvoir et al. (1949) adds system's labeling upon women to be incidental, inessential and the other, the stories of our research participants gave us an insight the biggest challenges in the path of a woman leader comes out of her labeling as the other.

Samjauta discussed of how she was treated differently from her brother, and how her brother was considered her savior by her own family. This treatment, as stated by Samjhauta, continued with the allocation of different roles to girls and boys respectively and ended up with limitation of the periphery for her to exhibit what she was as an individual (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). She even added that discriminatory behavior of her parents, society and relatives towards her prohibited investment on her (Devkota & Bagale, 2015), and stood as barrier to her leadership journey. She even added that although equality in investment in a child's academic achievement appears as limelight almost every morning (e.g., Pasqua, 2005), parents like hers still think and rethink while deciding on whether or not to send both daughter and son of similar age to the same engineering college (e.g., Hess, 2017). Her repeated narration of how she was excessively persuaded to choose the subject like nursing that was considered sublime and subtle (e.g., Campos, 2017) enabled us in strengthening our understanding that the notion of women are meant to be submissive (Sultana, 2010) adds to her hinderances on the way to standing educational leader.

Karuna's leadership journey was inspired by her mother. Her story provided us with an understanding that mothers can be greater role models to daughters who aspire to rise to leadership. Nonetheless, her positionality as leader in her own school was not easy. As Shava et al. (2019) articulates that women leaders in educational institutions still walk across a wide range of adversities, she had faced a wide array of challenges in her own institution. She noted that despite the position she possessed as the principal, executive decisions were taken by her husband who had no real connection with education. With tears in her eyes, she reported how women are marginalized in decision- making (Hoare & Gell, 2009) though she is given leadership positions in the educational institutions. Her recollection took us back to Sultana (2010) who mentions that no matter how developed the society seems to look, women are still confined within confines of structured patriarchy where they are expected to be protected and taught to accept the decisions that other parents, teachers, and other male members make (Sultana, 2010). As a result of this internment, women tend to lack the skills and confidence needed to function effectively in positions of formal leadership (Mathipa & Tsoka, 2001). Furthermore, Karuna even noted that leadership trainings that were proposed for the school team would rarely be notified to her, or any other women who were performing administrative roles. She considered the limitation to have handicapped them from reaching better opportunities. And when we brought Karuna's narration in alignment with Yildrim et al. (2021), our understanding got legitimized that no matter whether women are educated or employed, they are still substandard when it comes to performing legislative roles.

Amid challenges the women leaders narrated, they had stood erect and were considered as examples. Their exemplification, which we had heard from their school families had enabled us to understand more about mechanisms they had applied to cope with challenges. Bibechana stated of her passion and strong will that never let her move an inch from her leadership aspiration. Similarly, Karuna stressed on her practice of altruism that had enabled her to stand firmly even when her stance was condemned. Taking reference of persons like Mahatma Gandhi who has been epitomized for service, self-sacrificial love, integrity, emphasizing followers' needs and modelling (Barnabas & Clifford, 2012), Karuna recounted compassion and altruism as mechanisms to ease her leadership experiences. The discourse of altruism even echoed in Samjhauta who regarded Mother Teresa as an epitome. As per Samjauta, Mother Teresa's altruism, illustrated by Elliott (2013) in his reflection upon Teresa's journey of self-sacrifice has still been recounted as an attribute for her attainment of reverence. Samjhauta stated that even though she had entered into nursing because her parents wanted her to do so, she had adhered to her profession

with true integrity and passion. For her, no matter one does, devotion towards what he/she is doing is the only way to attain success and recognition. Her articulation fortified our understanding that passion, dedication, compassion and integrity can contribute as coping mechanisms to leadership success of women leaders.

Conclusion

Started with an aim of uncovering leadership experiences of women who are leading private schools in Kathmandu Valley, this study concludes that the journey of the women leaders was challenging. Although they stood to be role models among the mass, they had gone through a number of challenges on the way to achieving their leadership positionality. The challenges were mostly related to their gender-based values prevalent in the society where they had been living. Judgements about their capabilities, discriminatory treatment on the foundation of their gender, and constraints to their decisive roles were the challenges they had faced. However, they had not let themselves be diverted from their leadership aspiration. They considered passion, willpower, positivity, professional dedication and integrity as basis to forming coping mechanism and attaining leadership success.

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