

# Unfolding Perceived Work Stress of Female School Leaders of Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

Stress is a complex and multifaceted term with a multitude of interpretations depending on the context. There are various dimensions of stress like physiological, psychological, and social. The relationship between stress and women's health is complex and multifaceted. Women often face unique stressors due to societal expectations, gender roles, and biological factors, making them vulnerable to various health consequences. The purpose of this paper is to unfold the perceived stress of female school leaders in Nepal. A qualitative study design was applied using a purposive sampling technique. Data was collected from eleven female school leaders from various parts of the country capturing recently retired from the headship, highly experienced and newly appointed school leaders. The virtual interview was conducted using open-ended guiding questions. Obtained data was transcribed, coded, and categorized and nine different themes were generated to interpret them. From the study, it was found that female school head teachers have been perceived stress from time scarcity, poor resources in the school, low teacher motivation, a fragile team in the school, political interference, patriarchal structures of the society, difficulty in managing their homeostasis and unmanaged school administration. By acknowledging its impact, adopting effective management strategies, and fostering a supportive environment, we can empower these women to reach their full potential and contribute even more to the advancement of education in Nepal.

**Key Words:** Perceived Stress, Female School Leaders, Time Scarcity, Fragile Team, Patriarchal Structures.

## INTRODUCTION

### Understanding Stress

Stress is the natural response of humans resulting from various challenging situations. It is obvious that all people have experienced it throughout their history and human history. Human everyday life is full of stress and strain so the present century is called the stress era [1]. According to [2], there are two broad components of stress, namely time pressure i.e., *time stress* and the feeling of stress i.e., *anxiety*. As per their explanation, *time stress* refers to the time pressure arising out of work deadlines, or the massive amount of work to be completed within the little time available. Similarly, *anxiety* is categorized as a second component of job-related feelings of stress. If we look into the keywords and statements like extra hours at work, working on a holiday, attending meetings during private hours [3], and working overtime [4], they all direct towards the *time stress* component of work stress. Similarly, the *anxiety* component of work stress is reflected in the keywords and statements like – the feeling of unpleasant negative emotions [5] the way one feels, thinks, behaves, and bodily experiences [6].

Academic stress is an important stressor in the life of school leaders, teachers and even students [7]. Such stress can be characterized as anxiety and pressure that comes from various school-related factors like high absenteeism of teachers and students, poor infrastructure, feeble teaching-learning process, low academic achievement of the schools, low participation of the parents and the community, and others. According to [8], there are various causes of stress like work, relationships, finances, health, major life changes and traumatic events such as natural disasters. In the case of the stress of the school leaders, these factors might have a great influence.

According to [9], stress is a complex and multifaceted term with a multitude of interpretations depending on the context. There are various dimensions of stress like physiological, psychological, and social. From a physiological perspective, stress is the body's natural response to a perceived threat or demand. When faced with such a challenge, the body activates the fight-or-flight response, releasing hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones increase heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing, preparing the body to either confronts or flees from the perceived danger. Likewise, from the psychological perspective, stress refers to the feeling of

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emotional strain or tension caused by a demanding or challenging situation. This feeling can be evident as anxiety, worry, frustration, or even anger. It can also be attended by physical symptoms like headaches, muscle tension, and exhaustion. In addition to the above-mentioned dimensions, the social dimension is also crucial as stress is also shaped by social factors. Societal expectations, work demands, and interpersonal conflicts can all contribute to an individual's stress levels. Additionally, factors like discrimination, poverty, and lack of social support can exacerbate stress and its negative consequences. Understanding the multifaceted nature of stress is crucial for developing effective coping strategies and promoting individual and societal well-being. By recognizing the physiological, psychological, and social dimensions of stress, we can better equip ourselves to navigate challenges and maintain emotional balance in a demanding world [10].

### Occupational Stress

There is no doubt that teaching has become a more demanding and intense job. Not surprisingly, teaching has been identified as one of the professions associated with high to very high levels of occupational stress [11]. In leading schools, distress has been linked to dissatisfaction with the job and negative affective and professional consequences [12]. Factors like excessive work, lack of administrative and parental support, inadequate salaries, disciplinary problems, lack of students' interest, overcrowded classrooms, and public criticism of teachers/head teachers and their work directly influence the stress [13]. Stress among school leaders can be defined as their coping capability with unpleasant and unfavorable feelings that are connected to their jobs. Different facets of their teaching career may cause these feelings to surface, including anger, worry, tension, frustration, or even melancholy [14]. The outcomes of stress among school leaders may lead to increased blood pressure, heart-related problems increased leaders' turnover, and high absenteeism.

School leaders' stress is the outcome of the lack of sync between the work pressures and demands made on the teaching professionals and their ability to manage or handle those demands [15]. Most of us may believe in doing the work that we love to do and can do this work more often; however, this approach to work may lead to burnout and impact our mental health severely. Even the World Health Organization recommends increasing the number of healthcare providers who deal with mental health problems due to work overload. Some of the roles that are likely to face burnouts and this list include teachers and principals [16]. Stress is more common in education and health-related jobs than in other jobs [17].

School leaders facing work overload, poor communication, and fear of losing jobs are some of the prominent causes of stress [18]. A more structured categorization of employee stress is divided into work contents and work context. The former includes employee experiences such as work monotony, purpose-lacking tasks, lack of variety, too much or too less work, the burden of work deadlines, inflexible working hours, lacking participation and control, whereas the latter includes employee experiences such as poor career development and promotion opportunities, job insecurity, improper pay, role ambiguity and conflict, improper performance evaluation practices, unsupportive workplace with poor interpersonal relationships and organization culture, and the lack of support from work and office towards maintaining work-life balance [19].

In summary, job stress among teachers and school leaders was observed thoughtfully. This stress stems from a complex interplay of factors, including increased workload and administrative tasks

[20], inadequate resources and funding, lack of autonomy and control student behavior issues [21], accountability pressures and high expectations of stakeholders [20]. These factors contribute to a significant impact on school leaders' well-being, leading to burnout and decreased job satisfaction [22], physical and mental health problems [10] and decreased student outcomes [20].

### Stress and Health

A recent qualitative study conducted by [23] on Cyberbullying on social media under the heading "An Analysis of Teachers' Unheard Voices and Coping Strategies in Nepal" among 20 participants, highlights the loss of confidence, development of fear, anxiety and stress due to cyberbullying by teenage students via Facebook messenger. When we experience stress, our bodies go into "fight-or-flight" mode, releasing hormones that prepare us to deal with the threat. This can be helpful in the short term, but if stress becomes chronic, it can have a negative impact on our physical and mental health. Continuous exposure to stressful situations seriously depletes leaders' emotional and physical resources, thus leaving an individual unable to cope successfully with further stress [24]. On the individual level, stress may result in changes in the way one *feels* (anxiety, depression, fatigue), *thinks* (poor concentration, decision making and problem-solving), *behaves* (repeated mistakes, eating and sleeping issues, use of tobacco and alcohol, aggression) and *bodily experiences* like sweating, dizziness, breathless, asthma, ulcers and even cardiac problems.

### Gender and Stress

There are differing claims of researchers about the role of demographics like gender, age, and marital status in stress. In the context of a patriarchal society, where females are expected to accept male dominance [25] highlight on teachers' gender which may have significance in understanding stress. In addition [26] mention that women face a significantly higher amount of stress than men as women have less time available with their children, family, and friends. In the context of Nepal [27] established that there exists no relation between gender and stress. However [28] have highlighted the role of gender in the display of some of the stress dimensions like altruism and courtesy are common female characteristics whereas civic virtue, conscientiousness, and sportsmanship are common male characteristics. The relationship between stress and women's health is complex and multifaceted. Women often face unique stressors due to societal expectations, gender roles, and biological factors, making them vulnerable to various health consequences. Stress can increase the risk of mental health issues [29] and also increase the risk of heart disease [30]. In rare cases, severe stress can trigger a temporary weakening of the heart muscle, known as stress-induced cardiomyopathy [31].

### My Arguments

Female head teachers in Nepal face a unique set of challenges that contribute to their stress levels. Understanding these stressors is crucial for supporting their well-being and ensuring their continued success in leading schools. According to [32], school leaders manipulate administrative duties, teaching responsibilities, and pastoral care for students, all while managing their own families and personal lives. This constant workload and pressure to excel in diverse areas can lead to significant stress. Likewise, gender stereotypes and societal expectations can create additional hurdles for female leaders. They may face challenges in asserting their authority, battling unconscious biases, and navigating a male-dominated educational landscape [33]. Resource constraints are

common in Nepali schools, particularly in rural areas. Inadequate infrastructure, limited budgets, and lack of access to professional development opportunities can add to the burden and stress of leadership [34]. In addition to these, the demands of the job often leave little time for personal life and self-care. This can lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and negative impacts on the physical and mental health of women [32]. Societal expectations and traditional gender roles can conflict with the demands of leadership. Female head teachers may face pressure to prioritize family responsibilities over their professional roles, leading to internal conflict and stress [33]. These shreds of evidence show the problems of school female head teachers in Nepal. So, this article attempts to unfold the perceived stress of women school leaders which will be instrumental to solving the women school leaders' health problems created by the stressful situation.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper was to unfold the perceived work stress of female school leaders. The truth or reality regarding the perception of felt stress can be unfolded from the human brain. Hence the ontological belief of this study is subjectivism or multiple realities as the study participants share their perceptions differently. Hence, closeness with the participants was essential which the epistemological belief of this study is [35]. Based on ontological and epistemological beliefs interpretivism is the paradigm of this study [36]. Hence, I used the qualitative research design. To get authentic information, I tried to select study participants purposively. I tried to collect the information from the junior, senior and recently retired female school leaders. There were 3 recently retired school leaders having more than 3 decades of experience, 4 participants with around two decades of experience and remaining 4 having less experience in school leading. Throughout the country, I tried to collect information from 11 participants. Online interview was the method of collecting data from the participants. I prepared guiding questions related to perceived stress by the school leaders and applied for the authentic data by using the interview technique as suggested by [37]. I requested the participants to provide information related to their perceived stress. By taking the informed consent, I conducted virtual interviews with the participants during October 2023 by using flexible, open-ended questions with a pre-defined guide to ensure coverage of key themes related to stress. I also used probing and follow-up questions based on responses. I tried to collect rich, in-depth data, and capture nuances of experiences and perspectives related to work stress. Though I have attempted to capture real-world experiences, reveal valuable insights into leadership practices and strategies there might be certain limitations like missing important nuances or unexpected insights. The collected data was transcribed, coded, and categorized and proper themes were prepared and analyzed as per the categorization as indicated by [38].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the obtained data from the interview and transcription of the data following nine themes have been generated, analyzed and discussed.

### Time Management and Making a Balance between Personal and Professional Life

As proper management of time is a crucial part of overall management, most of the female school leaders have mentioned that they are facing difficulty in managing time as they have to

play dual roles i.e. leading a home and leading a school. One of the recently retired head teachers has reported that due to her age factor, it had become difficult for her to put extra effort into conducting additional meetings to enhance access to grants and emphasize infrastructure development. She said that sometimes she had to miss opportunities to get grants and donations for her school due to her inability to attend the meeting which used to run till late at night. She sadly mentioned that when she could not attend her family gatherings due to the work at the school, others' perceptions towards her used to be different. According to a head teacher having only a few years of experience, the management of time and other household's work with quality time at the workplace was reported as one of the most challenging tasks and stress-creating factors for women head teachers, however, they are putting effort into making a balance between them.

A head teacher with more than a decade of experience says, "Most importantly, time management is the main problem faced by female head teachers. Making a balance between family life and the workplace is a challenging task for a woman leader." A newly appointed head teacher also focuses on making a balance between personal and professional life, playing a dual role, and winning the esteem consideration of all the stakeholders are very challenging for female leaders. As most of the head teachers mentioned, a head teacher having the experience more than two decades has also stressed that the ability to manage time and make a balance between family life and the workplace is the most stress-creating factor for female leaders. According to an experienced head teacher, working women have to perform double duty and responsibility which makes it a bit tiresome to manage time and maintain a balance. Despite having a great desire to give enough time and effort to the workplace they are not able to do so. In comparison to the past, women have been empowered, are capable, can stand on their own, and are able to raise their voices and fight for themselves however; still, they are lagging behind in getting grants due to the biases and dominating nature of concerned authorities and its people.

The above analysis can be discussed by linking with the various research findings related to time management and stress. In Nepal's growing academic landscape, female leaders are rising to reputation, defying traditional gender roles and making significant contributions to education. However, their journey is often anxious with hidden obstacles like time scarcity. Implicit and explicit gender bias can result in female leaders being assigned more administrative tasks or "women's work," further reducing their time for research and career advancement [39]. In addition to this, navigating demanding academic schedules with limited flexibility often leads to chronic stress and burnout [40]. In this regard [41] state that there is a double burden for Nepali women for balancing professional demands with familial responsibilities and societal expectations of domesticity. Managing household duties and childcare often leaves them with less time for professional development and self-care [42]. Despite these sort of obstacles they have been doing their best for improving schools.

### Resource Management as a Key Source of Stress

Regarding the difficulty in managing resources, a head teacher with experience of more than a decade mentions that the lack of teachers as per the ratio of the students, and the reluctance and lack of coordination of the local government and Education Development and Coordination Unit (EDCU) to manage subject-



wise teachers and other educational affairs have been affecting the students' overall achievement resulting stress to the school leaders. In this connection, a newly appointed head teacher said, *"We have a great desire to move according to the techno-centric era, make our school techno-friendly by incorporating technology for effective teaching-learning, managing the classrooms along with all infrastructure development but despite having desire these are the challenges that female head teachers have to face"*.

Just providing responsibility and accomplishing it are two different things. In this regard, an experienced head teacher reported that running an under-resourced school together with and comparing with other resources-equipped schools is a very difficult task. She said that it would have been easy for her if the school had had sufficient infrastructure, but the condition was not so. Managing each and everything was troublesome for her. She sadly mentioned, *"On one hand, it was difficult to develop infrastructure, on the other hand, there was a great challenge to deal with the quality of the education and the number of students which made me so anxious"*. As reported by one of the other headteachers, the need for extra effort to manage donations or to find supporting hands for resource management, less concern of the School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA), political interference, lack of proficient, dynamic and dedicated teachers, and unclear policy are posing threat to female school leaders. Sometimes, some of the stubborn, impertinent and backbiting teachers who don't give much time to the school and lack the habit of self-realization are troublesome for a female head teacher as they do not want to obey female headships. And sometimes the leader has to tolerate baseless blame. In her school where most of the children come from poor economic backgrounds, and some of them stay at others' houses to study, there was no concern of local people. As a result, it was essential but challenging to play a coordinative role in raising the attention of the local people. It was not easy to win the esteem consideration of the people who do not believe that women can do.

One another female head teacher has mentioned that her school lacks a sustainable source of income. Despite having fewer resources, she has to manage teachers from internal funds which causes her stress most of the time. Sometimes, she faces difficulties in managing classes due to the inability to provide incentives to the teachers for their additional contributions. Managing subject-wise teachers, coordinating with teachers, students, guardians, community, local level, and others, and maintaining discipline are some factors that pose problems for her. Unnecessary pressure and political interference are some of the significant stress-creating factors. She emphasized the importance of digital literacy and said that she faces a great challenge to make herself techno-centric and her school ICT-friendly to adjust to the globalized era. The development of infrastructure, especially the science lab, computer lab, and ICT lab, and making their proper use is also a stress-creating factor for her. Being slightly disappointed, she mentioned, *"The lack of competent manpower in the administration has caused difficulties in accomplishing tasks on time. Accountants have to bear an overload of work with low payment"*.

Leading a school in Nepal, especially for women, is a complex and demanding role. Beyond the usual administrative, pedagogical, and community engagement responsibilities, female school leaders face the unique challenge of managing limited resources in a context where scarcity is the norm. According to [43], inadequate government funding often leads to budget shortfalls, hindering

infrastructure development, teacher salaries, and essential learning materials. Staff shortages and high student-teacher ratios can stretch leaders thin and impede effective teaching and learning [42]. Gender biases within communities and education systems can further disadvantage female leaders, limiting their access to funding, training opportunities, and decision-making power [39]. Poor infrastructure, including inadequate classrooms, sanitation facilities, and technology access, can severely hinder learning environments and student well-being [44]. This sort of situation obviously creates a stressful situation for female school leaders. However, as per their sharing they have been attempting to manage resources for their schools.

### Low Teacher Motivation as a Key Stressor

Motivational factors play a significant role in stress management. The ability of a head teacher to motivate and encourage the teachers determines the level of stress. It means high motivation results in low stress and low motivation high stress. A highly experienced head teacher said, *"I don't like to be absent from school, however, when teachers are absent, it stresses me out the most. And I become more delighted seeing all the teachers present at school."* Her expression seems to be saying that if the teachers are motivated not to take leave except in emergencies it could help in reducing the level of anxiety. Another female leader of a school said, *"Making all kinds of teachers happy and encouraging them in their work has really been a challenging task for me"*. She further added that motivation is required for them as well. According to her, the reluctance of the teachers to follow the code of conduct and fill the logbook has increased her stress. She said, *"Sometimes a desire to resign from the post comes into my mind when things don't go according to my expectations"*. Her words indicate the requirement of motivation not only for the teachers but also for the school leaders. An experienced head teacher has claimed that the leader of the school needs to be cooperative and be a role model to motivate all the teachers. A junior head teacher also emphasized the essence of dedicated and motivated teachers for better performance.

Giving stress to the motivational factor, a highly experienced female head teacher of Kathmandu metropolitan city has mentioned that her school's lack of a good team as she expected is creating problems. She added that there are some such teachers who do not obey the leader and have the concept of just doing duty without the feeling of dedication and love for the profession, have no accountability for the students' achievement, and no system has been made to evaluate their performance. She further added Lack of need-based refreshment training, supervision and support systems are the key things to create disappointment. Emphasizing the need for motivation for the teachers including the head teachers, an experienced head teacher has mentioned that more people can be found in society who wants to demotivate and discourage females in comparison to those who encourage and motivate them. She has also mentioned, *"Females do the task with great devotion however the credit goes to male counterparts"* which represents the need of motivation for them. A junior head teacher says, *"Neither any word of appreciation nor any basis for evaluating the hard work of a female leader has yet been made so it has demotivated female head teachers"*.

It is obvious that, in the education system, teachers play a vital and critical role in shaping the future of young minds. However, low teacher motivation has emerged as a concerning trend, with potentially detrimental consequences for both school leaders and students. Compared to other professions, teachers in Nepal often

face inadequate salaries and limited benefits, leading to financial insecurity and dissatisfaction [44]. Limited access to training and resources hinders teachers' professional growth and can lead to feelings of inaction and lack of career prospects [45]. Overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teaching materials can make it challenging to deliver effective instruction, contributing to teacher stress and burnout. Rigid curriculum frameworks and bureaucratic structures can restrict teachers' autonomy and sense of agency, leading to frustration and demotivation [46]. Long working hours, demanding administrative tasks and inadequate childcare support can create work-life imbalance, impacting teachers' well-being and motivation [41]. These sorts of low motivation of the teachers directly influence the stress level of the school head. However, the female head teachers have been managing their best for the improvement of the schools.

### Fragile Team is the Source of Stress

Coordination is the key to performing any task duly, efficiently and effectively. The main challenge for today's leaders is to make a strong team addressing and incorporating everyone's voice. Leaders should have the capacity to wave all their co-workers in a thread and inspire and execute them properly. Especially in a school if the team is strong, and if the lead is shared, the head teachers can be stress-free and the school can be on the way to progress. However, some of the head teachers of the schools are facing difficulty in team building which has been a matter of anxiety for them.

Some of the female head teachers have reported that they are facing trouble to include all the females in the collaborative team as the females themselves are the main opponents of females. Regarding this concern, a senior head teacher says, *"Women can't easily accept the existence of a woman that stresses me the most"*. Similarly, a junior head teacher added, *"Being a female head teacher, I could hardly find other supportive friends, especially women, who support with their open heart"*. According to a highly experienced head teacher, coordinating with the stakeholders, coping with misconceptions of the people, and working with non-supportive female colleagues are really challenging tasks for a woman.

It is not easy for a woman leader to play a coordinating role with all the stakeholders. Adding her personal experiences, a junior head teacher has also said that coordination and collaboration with the community is a stress-creating matter. Emphasizing the difficulty of making strong bonds and coordination with females, a recently retired head teacher says that not only the males but also mainly the females themselves are the opponents of women and they want to demolish them by dragging their legs. Most of the co-workers do not want to work under the headship of a female, so they play tricky games to chuck a woman leader from the post. She further added, *"I don't know whether the fault is on myself but I think that no school can run smoothly without having a strong team where there are laborious, updated, and dedicated teachers"*. Finally, she mentioned that political interference is one of the main stress-creating issues.

Female head teachers often face a hidden stressor like managing a fragile team. There is a serious impact of fragile teams on the well-being and leadership effectiveness of female head teachers in Nepal, proposing strategies to build resilience and navigate challenging team dynamics. There is a lack of trust and collaboration among the key school stakeholders [40, 44]. Lack of access to professional development, mentorship, or peer support can leave female head teachers feeling isolated and ill-equipped to handle challenging team dynamics. Low-performing teams in schools can trigger a

domino effect of negative consequences, impacting students, teachers, and the entire school community. By acknowledging the detrimental effects and proactively implementing strategies to foster high-performing teams, we can create a more supportive and collaborative environment for learning and success for all [47, 48]. Hence, a fragile team can create stress for the school leaders. Despite facing various challenges for preparing super team in the school, the female head teachers have been attempting to prepare the functional team in their respective schools.

### Political Interference as a Stress Creator

Political interference has been a cross-cutting issue that is highly dominant in all sectors. In schools, mainly the female head teachers have been pressurized due to political interference. An experienced senior head teacher says that the trend of involvement of teachers in different political organizations is not good for the schools. She further added, *"Sometimes, especially during the teacher selection process, we have to face unnecessary pressure, it might be due to the lack of decision-making power of the head teacher. Moreover, I have defeated all such cases till now."* She added. As she has been leading a school for a long time she claimed that she has felt pressurized due to political interference. She mentioned that the voice of females is always tried to be suppressed by the so-called male dominating society. With the feeling of nervousness as if she is being oppressed, she mentioned, *"Even in most of the formal programs, less chance is given to females instead male leaders are prioritized and if we want to express our words we are compelled to rebel there"*. More opportunities are given to males.

She said that there is a tendency to torture by picking nonsense discussions on unnecessary things that make a woman mentally weak. She wondered why some people paid more attention to the personal matters of female leaders rather than professional aspects. Females are taken as second-class citizens, though they are qualified, and have the expertise and capability to handle everything properly. In the end, she shared that to get victory, women leaders need to be courageous enough to tackle any challenges that occur in the battle. In this regard, an experienced head teacher of a school has pointed out that the challenges faced by the head teachers of public schools are the same. However, having no specified criteria for granting donations to the schools has led to significant differences and biases among the schools.

Beyond the usual responsibilities, female school leaders often face a unique stressor like navigating the often-turbulent waters of political interference. Politically motivated appointments and transfers of school leaders, often based on party affiliation or personal connections, can undermine meritocratic systems and create instability for schools [41]. Leaders may be pressured to prioritize the interests of specific political groups or communities, potentially compromising fairness and educational quality [39]. Political actors may exert pressure on leaders regarding curriculum, resource allocation, or hiring practices, limiting their autonomy and professional judgment [42]. Leaders may face demands for personal favors or financial contributions from political figures, creating ethical dilemmas and compromising their integrity [44]. This sort of malpractice is obvious to create stress in the female school leaders. The head teachers have been facing such interferences and accelerating their schools.

### Domination of Patriarchal Society Creates Stress

Though time has changed, the concept and the belief systems of the people have not yet been changed. The discriminating

nature of the people in our so-called patriarchal society has been a matter of stress to many of the female leaders. According to an experienced senior head teacher, the dominating nature of the people in our patriarchal society was reported as one of the major causes of stress for women leaders. Similarly, an experienced head teacher has reported that in a patriarchal society, people could hardly believe the capability of a woman, even after performing good results, females have to prove. The soft nature of women also creates hurdles in some cases, she said. According to her, women are restricted by social boundaries to organizing and being involved in additional gatherings with other leaders from different organizations as a result she doesn't have good access to collect donations and other financial support from them.

In this concern, a senior head teacher has mentioned, *"I didn't feel any other notable bitter experience being a female head teacher, even though, I felt it a bit difficult to accomplish some tasks in collaboration with male teachers by maintaining intimacy with them. I feel it is difficult due to gender differences that prevail in our society"*. Likewise, an experienced head teacher has reported that people are occupied with the concept that only males should be in the leading position. So, a woman has a great challenge to break this misconception. Neither any word of appreciation nor any basis for evaluating the hard work of a female leader has yet been made so it has demotivated female head teachers. As a result, only a few numbers of females are in leading positions despite having the capacity and a high potential to bring change.

Female school leaders face a deeply rooted obstacle of navigating the complexities of a patriarchal society. The dominance of patriarchal norms often restricts women's access to leadership positions, creating a scarcity of female role models in the education system [39]. Female school leaders may face challenges in establishing their authority and garnering respect from male colleagues, parents, and community members who hold traditional views about gender roles [41]. Societal expectations of women as primary caregivers often lead to a double burden, forcing female leaders to juggle demanding professional responsibilities with domestic duties, contributing to chronic stress and exhaustion [44]. Likewise, female leaders may face subtle or even overt gender-based discrimination and harassment, creating a hostile work environment and impacting their well-being [42]. Hence, it clearly indicates that the complexities of a patriarchal society are the strong factors for creating stress in female school heads. However, head teachers have been attempting to resolve the problems and leading their schools.

### **Conflict among Multiple Stakeholders as a Source of Stress**

Regarding the burning issue of conflict management, a senior female head teacher has mentioned that conflict management is one of the major challenging issues for women leaders. According to her, Conflict may arise among the students, teachers, and guardians which create stress. The grouping behavior of the teachers also creates stress. Threatening the head teacher, putting unnecessary pressure, and blaming unreasonably intending to create fuss and making them weak is often common in running school administration, which is also a stress creator. She mentioned that Covid-19 has had long-term effects on the students. Saying this, she further added that according to her guardians, the students spent most of their time hanging on the mobile and they have mobile addiction that has hampered in their study. The way of using mobile could have been changed to assist learning. However, most of the teachers do not have developed the skills to cope with those challenges and some skilled ones

also do not like to use their expertise in addressing such issues, instead, they imitate other inactive ones. Guardians' less concern for their children, some parentless students' discipline and their irregularity, increased involvement of some students in drug addiction have created obstacles to connecting them in learning, she added. These factors have been causing stress to her. Though some teachers are unfamiliar with the teaching-learning facilitation process and student assessment system as mentioned in the changed curriculum, they feel hassle of participating in training, which is reported as another stress-adding component.

For school head teachers, navigating the intricate web of conflicts among multiple stakeholders can be a significant source of stress, impacting their well-being and effectiveness. Diverse expectations regarding academic performance, teaching methods, and school policies can create friction between parents and teachers, requiring head teachers to mediate and find solutions that balance individual needs and institutional goals [49]. Resource allocation, workload distribution, and disciplinary issues can spark conflict between teachers and administrators. Head teachers must navigate these disagreements while ensuring fairness and maintaining a positive school climate [50]. Likewise, balancing the demands of government regulations and school board expectations with the needs of the local community can be a delicate dance. Head teachers must advocate for their schools while adhering to external pressures [51]. Cultural values, political agendas, and differing opinions on educational priorities can lead to tension between the school and the community. Head teachers need to build bridges, foster communication, and find common ground [44]. This discussion makes clear that conflict among multiple stakeholders is a source of stress. Head teachers have been utilizing their extra effort to resolve conflict wisely.

### **Difficulty in Managing Homeostasis Creates Much Stress**

Not only psychological and sociocultural factors but physiological factors also create stress to women though most of them do not want to reveal it. With a feeling of disconcert and a bit hesitation, one of the female head teachers shared her experience relating to her difficulty in managing her internal homeostasis. She said, *"A woman has to handle everything carefully despite having a high flow of bleeding during her menstrual period. Not only this, but also hiding the flow of undesired waste of breast milk during her postpartum period being deprived of meeting her few months' baby and getting involved in professional work creates hurdles with mental stress for a woman. I have a bitter experience of it."* A newly appointed female head teacher also mentioned that she faced a lot of hurdles in running her school administration smoothly together with managing the nurture of her a few months old baby. She said, *"I collected enough courage to cope with the challenges and performed each and every responsibility efficiently, paid attention to time management. So, no one could raise any questions about my performance"*. One of the female head teachers with a long experience of headship said that she felt difficulty in managing female teachers' periods during their leave after delivery. She said, *"Two female teachers in my school were pregnant at the same time and gave birth to their babies in the same months when we had the pressure of final examination. At that time neither I could manage their periods through internal human resources nor could hire and appoint new teachers"*. This sort of situation creates much stress. However, I am trying my best to perform what I can.

The Artales framework, developed by [52] refers a lens through which to analyze the leadership practices and challenges faced by school principals. It posits that effective school leadership requires



the principal to maintain a balance between three core domains such as personal, professional, and technical. Personal domain refers to the principal's own well-being, including their physical and mental health, emotional state, and personal values. Likewise, professional domain encompasses the principal's leadership skills, knowledge of educational theory and practice, and ability to build relationships with stakeholders. In the same way technical domain involves the principal's understanding of school administration, resource management, and operational procedures. Homeostasis, a concept borrowed from biology, refers to the tendency of a system to maintain internal stability. In the context of school leadership, this translates to the principal's ability to manage the demands of all three domains while maintaining their own well-being. The perception of the female head teachers explained in the previous paragraph directly link with the framework developed by Sergiovanni and they have been attempting to make balance of stated three core domains.

### Unmanaged Administration of the School Creates Stress

One of the female head teachers reported that some of the important tasks such as resource allocation, budgeting, preparing a School Development Proposal, School Improvement Plan, social audit, preparing different proposals and submitting them need to be performed within the given time frame in the academic years are a bit complicated to handle to them. According to her, a load of administrative work along with the burden of teaching periods and inability to provide quality time to the students cause stress on them. She also mentioned that stress arises when she becomes unable to fulfill the demands of her supporting hands. She says that she has been using only words of appreciation to motivate them. She said that she had started to work collaboratively by incorporating cultural activities in school programs which she found troublesome to address the voices of diversity at the beginning however, that's easy these days.

One female head teacher reported that the socio-cultural and all other aspects, presence of the teachers, number of students, and role of the SMC are stress-creating factors. One of the factors that cause stress to the head teacher is the lack of transparency. She confidently claimed that women school leaders are more cautious and transparent in comparison to men regarding matters of economic administrative aspects. She further added that the head teachers need to be much more aware in the cases of economic administrative aspects as sometimes they are compelled to be the victim of baseless blame resulting in stress.

When the administration falters, the music turns into a jarring cacophony, with stress becoming the dominant note. Lack of clear policies, procedures, and communication channels lead to confusion, delays, and frustration for all stakeholders [53]. Inadequate allocation of resources, budget mismanagement, and lack of transparency can create tension and resentment among teachers and staff [54]. Unresponsive administration can neglect the needs of teachers for professional development, mentorship, and support, leading to feelings of isolation and inadequacy [55]. Unmanaged stress, coupled with feelings of disrespect and lack of appreciation, can lead to decreased morale, low job satisfaction, and ultimately, burnout among teachers and staff [56]. Stressed teachers are less effective in the classroom, creating a negative learning environment for students [57] and stressed school leaders may be less effective in running administration.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion provided in the previous sections, this section deals with the conclusion of the study. As per the obtained result, time scarcity is a significant, yet often overlooked, challenge faced by female school leaders in Nepal. Likewise, resource management is a significant source of stress. Low teacher motivation also plays a crucial role in creating stress for female school leaders. Leading a school with a fragile team is one of the significant sources of stress for female head teachers in Nepal. Additionally, political interference presents a significant challenge for female school leaders in Nepal. Patriarchal structures and gendered expectations create significant stress for female school leaders. While producing stress, conflicts among stakeholders are an inevitable reality in any school environment. Last but not least unmanaged school administration is not simply an inconvenience; it is a recipe for stress, dissatisfaction, and ultimately, a compromised learning environment.

By acknowledging its impact, adopting effective management strategies, and fostering a supportive environment, we can empower these women to reach their full potential and contribute even more to the advancement of education in Nepal. Likewise, by investing in their well-being and providing them with the necessary resources and support, we can ensure that female school leaders in Nepal continue to play a crucial role in building a brighter future for education. As females are the vast source of love, care, attention, affection and tolerance, they have the ability to create a familial environment in the school where children can grow properly, for that female leaders should be assisted in need. Further, by implementing comprehensive strategies to improve teacher well-being, support professional growth, and empower them within the educational landscape, we can foster a more motivated and engaged teaching force, ultimately leading to a brighter future for Nepalese students which ultimately minimize the stress level of the female school leaders. Considering the importance of a super team, it is essential to build team resilience and navigate difficult dynamics, and by fostering a supportive environment, we can empower these leaders to thrive and create more positive and productive school communities for all.

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