



## ARE WOMEN EFFECTIVE LEADERS?

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2019  
Received in revised form  
26<sup>th</sup> July, 2019  
Accepted 05<sup>th</sup> August, 2019  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2019

#### Key Words:

Leadership, Education,  
Gatekeeper, Women's rights,  
Perception.

### ABSTRACT

After initially researching women superintendents in private schools, we discovered that a gross underrepresentation exists, and we wanted to understand why this phenomenon exists globally and more specifically in the city of Phoenix, Arizona, which is one of the top 5 growing cities in the United States of America. This case study research expands on the prior research conducted and published by Glass and Bjork for the 2000 study of the “American School Superintendency” for American Association of School Administrators (AASA). In this article, the authors examine the disparity of male versus female superintendents in public schools across the country expanding on theories such as the Glass Ceiling to add clarity to the social problem. Further, Gender in Management: An International Journal published authors recently such 1. Nessorin Shaya (2017) “Feminizing leadership in the Middle East: Emirate women empowerment and leadership style” 2. Dene Hurley (2015) “Factors influencing attainment to CEO position for women” that explore the varying perspective on the topic of women in leadership. 3. Diana Woods (2007) “Work life balancing strategies used by women managers in British “modern” universities” I confirm that this manuscript has not been previously published and is not currently under consideration by any other journal. I have approved the contents of this paper and have agreed to the submission policies. Additionally, each named author has substantially contributed to conducting the underlying research and drafting this manuscript. To the best of our knowledge, the named author have no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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**Citation: Veronica G. Gatling, 2019. “Are women effective leaders?”, *International Journal of Development Research*, 09, (09), 30118-30123.**

### INTRODUCTION

The top Fortune 500 leadership roles dominated by men persists in 2018 (Florentine, S. 2018). Women are less likely to be promoted to senior leadership positions as confirmed in a survey of 132 companies and 34K employees contributing pipeline data (Thomas, Cooper, Rooney, McKinsey & Leanin.org, 2006). Furthermore, in an article about employees of the U.S. Department of Labor it toorecognizes fairness is only possible if everyone’s voice regardless of gender is included in the workplace (2016). Gender is not bound by gender. The world has to be a place where gender discrimination does not exit. Investigation into potential applicants for employment vacancies, indicated a problem of gender equity since post-World War II “Baby boom” generation (Winter, Rinehart, Keedy& Bjork, 2007, p. 36). The discrepancy in female leadership is concerning because women represent more than half of the population.

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The 2010 U.S. Census indicate that there are 156.9 million (50.8%) females and 152.8 million males (49.2%) in the United States. An explanatory case study of administrators in private school education in Phoenix, Arizona shockingly showed how women experience barriers to attaining or furthering their leadership in private school superintendent positionsby exploring perceptions derived from lived experience of leaders specifically in private school education. Discussion around the problem is valuable to educational leadership due to the overarching social implications of female inequality that exists in the education landscape. Current policies and practices are limiting contributions from more than fifty percent of the population because we are limiting the opportunities that are open to women in leadership. One practice to limit access is described in gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1951). Gatekeeping is the practice of constructing extensive social channels in a community to manage access to prized or influential positions. Gatekeeping theory indicates a series of pathways and gatekeeping as a way of managing social advancement. Gatekeeping has limited women to church and school as contexts to contribute to society, thereby

fostering a lessened drive to participate as a leader in one's community (Felton, 1996; Pisano, 2002; Hoobler, Lemmon & Wayne, 2011). The Achievement Ideology (Pieng et al., 2016) is held by many in corporate America who believe that "Success is based on merit, and economic inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability" (p.1). Individuals who believe in the achievement ideology perceive lack of achievement as a negative characteristic of women or others, who are underrepresented in leadership positions. The glass ceiling depicts the invisible yet impenetrable barriers for women seeking to advance to the uppermost levels of the corporate ladder. The lack of qualified women in leadership challenges the Achievement Ideology view of women in the hiring process at the highest level of education, which is school superintendent. The professional pursuit in private school hierarchy is daunting. Older men have historically led hiring boards creating barriers for women that could be scaled when equipped with accurate expectations and personal and professional networks of support. The perceived societal norms of gender, specifically women as a unique group, erroneously dictate that men are more skilled in leadership roles, thus furthering inequality (Scarborough, 2018).

The purpose of the present explanatory case study was to uncover perceived barriers women face in obtaining a superintendent position in private schools in Phoenix, Arizona from leaders within the field. All of the participants have the opportunity to act as a catalyst to shed insight and support on a gender phenomenon by providing advice to other women who have the ambition and qualifications to lead. The advice includes earning the proper credentials, gaining experience in operational and capital budgets, and possessing excellent communication skills (Gatling, 2016). Gender based underrepresentation in any form is problematic. Statistically, the education profession transcends to include more women, forcing the roles of women to correspond to that of their male counterparts. Research suggests an increased interest in recognizing the phenomenon of qualified women in educational leadership roles (Stephens, 2009; Florentine, 2018). With the influx of women in the workforce due to divorce, single mothers, and demographic form the hierarchical structure to include more women. However, the present research on the progress of female superintendents' points toward a gender disparity and has revealed many barriers to women becoming superintendents. The psychological effects of "false consciousness" serves as another rationalization for female subordination (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Cowan & Ullman, 2006; Dongchao, 2007). Women experience inequality regarding, gender roles, self-esteem, job and life satisfaction, and most importantly devaluing of self, known as horizontal hostility or as Cowan & Ullman refer to as in-group rejection (2006). The current trends related to women reflect regional ratios in 2010 versus 2000 that point to the same pattern of exponential growth (nationalatlas.gov). Aspects of Gatekeeping Theory support doors as representative of an "in" or "out" point in the movement which are called "gates." Gates are controlled either by organizational rules or employees with varying degrees of power who are inhibited from overstepping authority (Lewin, 1951, p. 186; Talerico, 2002). In the context of corporate America, the process of selection is a fluid process involving the screening of applicants with multiple subsections that are controlled to differing degrees by gatekeepers. As candidates for the proceed through the process for the appointment, aspirants must pass through a

series of doors that are controlled by persons with differing degrees of power. Women piercing through the traditional executive level roles usually attributed to men. According to the Fortune 500 Index, 22 women are CEO's (Florentine, 2018). From a global perspective, countries such as Nepal, Somalia, India, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Morocco, Philippines South Korea and Pakistan have come to realize the value of women leaders in consideration of the depth of knowledge and varied perspective they possess and are taking advantage of all qualified applicants regardless of gender. Two research questions were developed to examine the problem. RQ1: What perceived hurdles do female candidates face in obtaining a superintendent position in a private school in Phoenix, Arizona? RQ2: Why are these barriers perceived as present for women?

## METHODOLOGY

This study applied Giorgi's Five Concrete Steps of the Human Scientific Phenomenological Method (1997) to examine the lived experience of a phenomenon and its descriptive qualities. The five concrete steps involve the collection, reading, dividing, organizing, and expressing the data within the structure of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). Prior research has explored the psychological effects of "false consciousness" as this set of beliefs serves as a rationalization for female subordination (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Cowan & Ullman, 2006). The current trends related to women reflect a rise in discrimination lawsuits among large corporations ranging from 50 to 100 million in settlements (Dobbin and Kaley, 2016). The researchers placed telephone calls and sent invitation letters to 30 private schools to obtain a sample size of 15 K-12, K-5, 6-12 and 9-12th grade schools regardless of size. The participants were sought from the list of private schools equaling 37% of private schools in Phoenix, Arizona. The researchers incorporated unstructured and semi-structured interview questions in the data collection process allowing the respondents to express their opinions as they desired, which increases reliability and comparable qualitative research findings (Cohen and Crabtree, 2008). The goal was to find any patterns in responses gathered during the face-to-face interview process. Data gathering and analysis was in response to two research questions and used five interview questions, to delve into the perceived reasons for the underrepresentation of women in superintendent positions in Phoenix, Arizona. The systematic method used for data collection included in-depth interviews and NVIVO 10 software to support analysis detecting simple themes and word/phrase patterns.

**Context:** The perceived hurdles women candidates face in obtaining an executive position in Phoenix, Arizona are fleshed out in the case study. Private schools in Arizona were the context of the study. Phoenix is the capital of Arizona as well as the sixth most populous city in the United States (nationalatlas.gov, 2013). Phoenix was selected due to popularity ratings as the second fastest growing municipality in the State of Arizona. In addition, the National Atlas (2001) reports "Arizona's gender populations grew by 41% and 38.6%," respectively in the past decade making Arizona a prime location to conduct research related to gender and professional development. Examining the lived experiences of purposively selected individuals is a preferred approach as understanding a phenomenon and its descriptive qualities is paramount in this study. Interviews were conducted with open-ended questions to probe the perceptions of two related

groups: superintendents and board presidents either currently or previously serving in a private school. Thirty-minute interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded to ensure accuracy of transcription and analysis for emerging themes through key phrases and repetition of content.

**Population and sample:** A minimum of 15 respondents, 10 superintendents, and five board presidents from Phoenix private schools responded to the request to participate. Respondents, regardless of gender, were selected using several variables including age, time in position and holding currently or held one of the positions of superintendent and/or board president the private schools identified for this study had student populations ranging from 101 to 1000 or more students as criteria. These individuals were selected because there were in the position to closely observe or experience the phenomenon of research interest. Such factors as age, current or previous positions, gatekeeping, or length or time spent in education did not produce bias in this study. The goal of the interview process was to open up the discussion and allow the participants opportunity to share perceptions.

**Data Collection:** The goal of the interview process was to open the discussion and allow the participants opportunity to share perceptions. Face-to-face interviews from 10 private school superintendents and five school board presidents were collected to explain their perception from an inside point of view. The first step was a pilot test of the interview questions and the demographic survey that was conducted with two individuals who did not participate in the research study, but who met the criteria of the research participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The pilot test participants were one retired superintendent and one current school board president chosen from a list of perspective participants who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. The main purpose of testing the study's instruments was to determine whether or not the participants understood the questions, the appropriateness of the questions in relationship to the study's purpose, and whether additional questions were required to collect relevant data related to perception.

**Data Analysis:** The NVivo 10 software provided relational recognition if any with the coding of the alphanumeric value assigned within responses collected from the participants. Potential themes from the transcripts were categorized and coded using relationships and linkages with the data in line with the dialogue (Applebaum, 2011). Alphanumeric coding was assigned for each individual participant prior to interview instead of the use of school or participant name. The objective of analyzing and comparing responses from the participant's perspective and personal experiences was to determine the barriers to access. Data collection was conducted using an interview protocol to ascertain perceptions of the barriers females face leading to the underrepresentation as private school superintendents. Audio recordings of the interviews aided in gathering the most accurate interpretation of responses of the participants and allowed the notation of recurring words and concepts. The demographic information was used to track statistics such as age, marital status and professional category (superintendent or board president). Interview questions that lend to reliable conclusions (Tellis, 1997) particularly in collecting the participant perspective along with both men and women board presidents were used to understand the underrepresentation of women as superintendent in private schools in Phoenix, Arizona. The research participants were

within the same professional grouping with mixed gender, different personal background and channels of entry into the superintendency or board president selection yet the responses in relationship to the underrepresentation of female superintendents were similar as detailed in the data analysis through manual tracking of key words and phrases and the use of NVivo 10 coding. Tracking the recurring phrases and themes using a highlighter in three categories or nodes as self, environment, and other, which was further separated into internal, external and other categories to broaden the sub-themes. NVivo 10 provided nodes or codes representing themes related to the findings.

**Reliability and Credibility:** The interview notes, transcripts and field notes were cross references to ensure open and axial coding were continually refining and identifying relationships among the open codes. When the transcripts were imported into NVivo 10 for data analysis the use of coding to identify phrases or ideas were then connected to nodes that are representative of the concept of idea in the transcripts (Gibbs, 2002). The main nodes that resulted were coded as participant responses and sub-themes such as self-concept, work ethic, family and behavior were added as sub-themes emerged from the transcripts. Applying nodes to the findings and adding new nodes from the findings was an ongoing process during the interview collection phase. For example, several respondents mentioned biblical interpretation of leadership and who should lead according to Biblical mandates; therefore, the Biblical interpretation was added as a node (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). According to Kostenberger&Kostenberger the bible is the complete authority dictating men in leadership reinforcing gender inequity (2016).

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Descriptive demographic information for the 15 participants is displayed in Table 1. The demographic information shows that participants were highly placed administrators with appropriate levels of education and years of experience to speak confidently about the research phenomena of interest.

**Table 1. Comparative Demographic Data of all Participants (N=15)**

Participant	School Size	Highest Level of Education	Marital Status	Yr. in Education
P-1	Large	BA	M	5+
P-2	Large	MA	S	21+
P-3	Medium	MA	M	21+
P-4	Large	MA	M	16-20
P-5	Medium	BA	M	5
P-6	Large	MA	Div.	11-15
P-7	Large	MA	M	16-20
P-8	Large	MA	M	16-20
P-9	Medium	MA	M	21+
P-10	Medium	PhD	Wid.	21+
P-11	Medium	MA	M	21+
P-12	Medium	BA	M	21+
P-13	Large	PhD	M	21+
P-14	Large	MA	Div.	16-20
P-15	Large	PhD	Div.	21+

(Marital Status key: M-married; S-single; Div.-divorced; Wid.-widowed)

**RQ 1:** What perceived hurdles do female candidates face in obtaining a superintendent position in a private school in Phoenix, Arizona? (gate closers)

Table 2 displays the main themes discovered in response to **RQ**. A short discussion of each theme is provided below Table 2.

**Table 2.**

Themes:	Participants	Field Notes
Self-concept	100%	15
Gender Discrimination	100%	15
Educational/Experience	100%	15
Family Responsibilities and Expectations	100%	15
Underlying Beliefs	93%	14

Themes displayed in Table 2 reflect a high level of agreement from the participants. Four of these five themes were found in the data from every one of the 15 participants. Fourteen of the 15 participants reached agreement on the fifth theme, which as biblical beliefs about leadership. All of the respondents, 100% of the superintendents and board presidents indicated that women indeed experience additional hurdles that they must confront and overcome. The hurdles have been grouped in the following themes: (a) Self-awareness of applicant (b) Institutional expectation and (c) perceptions. The findings from the research study indicated that while the number of women in superintendent positions has grown in the last 50 years, hurdles remain for women trying to access the superintendent position in private schools in Phoenix, Arizona. Based on the interview response analysis, it is resounding that women have successfully plotted courses through the gatekeepers and gates and overcome barriers. Each of the 15 (100%) respondents strongly regard anything is possible for a knowledgeable determined female applicant. The response patterns from the participants in this study concur with Kelsey, Allen, Coke and Ballard (2014) findings of 20 superintendents in Texas that indicated that the top perceived factors that lead to “gate openers” are self-confidence, leadership skills and knowledge and professional networking. One explanation of these findings may be that private school boards and other gate keepers are seeking female candidates with a variety of perceived strong leadership qualities allowing the gates to open for more women in the future.

**Self-concept:** Concepts related to the “self” were notated in all 15 (100%) of the face-to-face interviews. The concept of self-awareness was mentioned in various forms including the mention of a female applicant’s personal beliefs, attitudes and self-concept, education and experience, professional behavior/emotional intelligence, character, body image and theological knowledge which create barriers to which women must respond. For instance; Participant number five noted that the confidence of a female applicant is sometimes not even detected personally; however, it is measured in how she walks, shakes hands, or makes eye contact, or alternatively avoids eye contact (Paraphrased for Confidentiality).

**Gender Discrimination:** Gender discrimination, female stereotypes, good ole-boy network, and culture as larger topics are common and mentioned by all respondents in this study. History of women iterate through women studies programs the power of gender expectations (Riley, 2007). Of the superintendents interviewed, six stated gender discrimination explicitly as a hurdle in gaining the superintendent position. Each participant provided specific examples of how gender discrimination in various forms is exhibited in either the culture at large, school board or other gatekeeper channels. The following are direct quotes from three of the participants. In this current economic climate boards are looking for business people more than educators and that’s a general concept both public and private, which includes men over women. In that sense to the extent that more women are

coming up the ranks out of education into administration rather than in administration training to come into administration that is a bias that weights toward the men. (Field Notes) Typically, there are reservations about the ability to lead men effectively that stem from corporations collectively and to be able to administer discipline within higher levels of education. There are reservations about a women’s ability administering discipline like a man. (Field Notes)

**Educational/Experience:** All of the 15 participants shared the responsibility to be part of the solution in promoting women that have the desire, qualifications and education to become a superintendent. The five board presidents confessed their obligation to intentionally seek or request additional female applicants from recruiting companies or universities when seeking leadership applicants (Field Notes, September 2015).

**Family Responsibilities and Expectations:** Family responsibilities and family expectations was the premier sub-theme that resonated with all respondents across all themes that emerged. An example of participant response is as follows: The lifestyle considerations are many. The female is saddled with all the juggling to meet the expectations of the family and the profession. (Field Notes). Of the 15 participants all (100%) indicated the family dynamics and school culture/right fit presented hurdles that had to be explored prior to taking a superintendent position. The five board president responses were identical in the level of scrutiny a female applicant with a family receives in the application review process. Based on the responses from the board presidents, the preferred female applicant is older, former teacher with possibly no children or adult children and willing to relocate.

**Underlying Beliefs:** The final thematic category of gate closers with several sub-themes of hurdles women face in attaining the superintendent position involve the larger system of private school academia include but are not limited to conservative beliefs systems related to leadership, family, professional reputation, who you know, and leadership related expectations (McCluney, 2018). All 15 (100%) of the respondents revealed that they personally knew of women that had to overcome barriers such as traditional family expectations, school culture and parents, and the glass ceiling to list a few additional barriers. Almost all the 15 respondents shared accounts they knew about from reading or of their own experience or of women colleagues.

Table 3 displays the main themes discovered in response to RQ. A short discussion of each theme is provided below Table 3

RQ2: Why are these barriers perceived as present for women? (Gate Openers)

**Table 3.**

Themes:		
Family Support	100%	15
School Culture/Right Fit	66%	8
Leadership Style	66%	8
Education/Experience	100%	15
Biblical Interpretation	60%	7

Arguments against Affirmative Action indicate that it has become a means of reverse discrimination against underrepresented groups. According to the law all people are

equal however women have not achieved equality in leadership positions. The concept of “think leader, think male” is pervasive in boardrooms (Hobbler et al., 2011; Scarborough, 2018). Participant responses were analyzed to answer research question: 2. “Why are these barriers perceived as present for women?” The 15 participants in this study indicated that there were perceived “gate closers and gate openers” that help women plot a course to the superintendency. The gate openers have been coded into factors that include themes and nodes as: Self-awareness, Institutional expectations, and Biblical perceptions- for simplicity and thematic overlapping. The fact that 10 out of 10 (100%) of the superintendent participants indicated that they obtained mentor support to achieve the superintendent position at various points during the journey to gaining the superintendency regardless of gender means that knowledge of “gate openers and gate closers” play a critical role for women in overcoming barriers in order to reach the private school superintendency in Phoenix, Arizona.

## DISCUSSION

The lived experience, perceptions, and people that act as catalysts to prevent qualified women from reaching the superintendent position in private school are considered “gate closers.” Several hurdles were stated in all 15 of the interviews conducted as shown in Table 2. The responses reflect that 100% of the men and women participants concede that hurdles exist specifically for women in the position or desiring to attain the superintendent position. According to Dobbin and Kalev (2016), organizations improve gender equality when diversity managers, task forces, and intentional mentoring structures report improvements in the representation of women and racial minorities (2016). Many of the repetitive themes were categorized using descriptions that are similar in meaning. The findings presented in this research suggested that the current numbers of women in superintendent positions are growing at a slow rate (Glass, 2000). The research interviews indicated that there are hurdles or gate closers related to access for females trying to reach the superintendent position that can be grouped into themes and sub-themes such as: Self-awareness, Institutional expectations, and Biblical perceptions. Research transferability is assumed due to the common traits in the legalities of sex discrimination claims, human experience and behavior across cultures and gender, which may not be accurate in all circumstances (Krefting, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). One small group was not assumed to be representative of the larger population. The scope of this research was private schools in Phoenix, Arizona. The transferable qualities of the research suggested further areas of inquiry and research within the broader spectrum of private and public schools. The rationale of the research method, interview analysis including reliability, and confidentiality procedures to make certain the study findings were replicable. The responsible aim is to derive truth in the phenomena.

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