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Women principals in Greek secondary education: Gendered stereotypes, role models, and work-life balance

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Abstract

This small-scale qualitative study examines how gendered social roles and expectations shape women's engagement with leadership in secondary education through the accounts of female principals in Attica, Greece. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with four principals using an original interview guide addressing demographic and professional background, gender as social identity, and perceptions of the principal role. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis through iterative coding and theme development. Findings indicate persistent gender stereotyping and an experienced double standard in leadership evaluation, with women described as facing closer scrutiny and with "strictness" more readily legitimized in men than in women. Participants also linked hesitation and self-restraint to the limited visibility of female role models. Family support, from both the family of origin and the immediate family, emerged as a key enabling condition for pursuing leadership. Work-life balance was depicted as contingent on time management, shared domestic responsibilities, and school culture, while administrative workload was experienced as displacing pedagogical engagement and challenging principals' pedagogical identity. Participants associated effective leadership with relational and organizational capacities including empathy, communication, flexibility, mediation, and the ability to motivate colleagues. The findings point to the need for gender-sensitive leadership development, mentoring structures, and organizational measures that reduce administrative burden and strengthen conditions for sustainable work-life integration.

Keywords: Women principals; secondary school principalship; gender bias; work-life balance

1. Introduction

Educational leadership is increasingly understood as a central condition for how schools are organized, how people collaborate, and how educational goals are pursued. Within this broad field, educational administration can be approached as a structured system of actions oriented around two interconnected priorities, the efficient use of material resources and the effective management of human resources, with the aim of maximizing benefit for all actors involved in the educational process ^[1]. Leadership positions in secondary education therefore involve more than formal authority, since they combine organizational responsibilities with expectations of pedagogical guidance and school improvement, and they shape professional identity and everyday decision making within the school community.

Despite the centrality of school leadership, access to and evaluation within leadership roles remain gendered. Social stereotypes refer to assumptions that attribute specific characteristics or roles to individuals or groups without an objective basis, and, when applied to gender and educational leadership, they tend to position women as oriented toward family and domestic responsibilities while presenting men as naturally suited for leadership ^[2]. In this sense, gender is not only a demographic variable but also a social identity shaped by norms that influence who is viewed as legitimate in authority and how leadership behaviors are interpreted. Research has further indicated that power and leadership are often associated with masculine characteristics, reinforcing male coded models of leadership that women are expected either to emulate or to contest ^[3].

International scholarship has repeatedly documented that women's pathways into educational leadership are shaped by context specific and cross national constraints, including organizational cultures, informal gatekeeping, and differential expectations about authority

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and credibility [4]. Studies across diverse settings suggest that the gender gap in school management cannot be reduced to individual ambition or competence, since entrenched patriarchal assumptions about authority and suitability have historically functioned as barriers to women's progression [5]. At the same time, the "glass ceiling" in schools is sustained through everyday discourses that normalize women's double workload and locate responsibility for reconciling professional and family roles primarily with women [6]. This framing is consequential because family related expectations and obligations, including motherhood and caregiving responsibilities, are frequently perceived as incompatible with leadership demands and thus operate as a deterrent for leadership aspirations or as a constraint on career progression [3].

In Greece, these gendered dynamics have been described as "invisible barriers" that influence women's career progress in secondary school leadership, including constraints linked to family responsibilities, limited support structures, and organizational cultures that implicitly privilege male leadership norms [7]. Yet, understanding how such mechanisms are experienced and narrated by women who have already entered leadership remains important, because it reveals how gendered expectations are negotiated in practice and how women interpret both the opportunities and the costs of assuming responsibility within schools. The present pilot qualitative study focuses on women principals in Attica, a region selected on the assumption that its social, economic, and cultural diversity allows access to a more plural distribution of perspectives across school settings (public and private) and professional biographies.

The purpose of the study is to examine how women in secondary education understand the role of gender in relation to pursuing leadership, and how their perceptions of the duties and demands of the school leader shape their willingness to claim such roles. To address this aim, the study draws on semi structured interviews and thematic analysis in order to foreground participants' voices and capture the complexity of factors shaping leadership intentions and experiences [8].

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: How do women in secondary education perceive the role of their gender in relation to their desire or decision to assume a position of responsibility in secondary education?

RQ2: What are their perceptions of the duties and demands of a school leader, and in what ways does this image influence their intention to pursue such a role?

Through addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how gendered expectations, family-related conditions, and the administrative configuration of the principalship intersect to shape women's access to, experiences of, and intentions toward leadership in Greek secondary education, while also identifying organizational and professional support conditions that may strengthen equitable and sustainable participation in school leadership.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research strategy and was designed as a small scale pilot inquiry focusing on women's perspectives on leadership in secondary education. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables in depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and

meanings, particularly in relation to how gendered identity and social expectations shape leadership intentions and decisions [9]. The target population comprised female school principals working in secondary education in the Region of Attica, Greece, across both the public and private sectors. Attica was selected on the rationale that its social, economic, and cultural diversity, together with the high number of school units, increases the likelihood of accessing a more heterogeneous pool of eligible participants. The final sample included four female principals, regardless of teaching specialization, with a minimum requirement of at least three years of service in secondary education in order to ensure an adequate experiential basis for reflective accounts of leadership related realities. Participant recruitment followed snowball sampling. An open invitation was disseminated via social media stating the study aim and inclusion criteria, and interested educators were asked to suggest additional colleagues who met the same criteria. This strategy was acknowledged as a limitation in terms of statistical representativeness, but considered appropriate for a small-scale qualitative pilot study [10].

Data were collected through semi structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility in allowing the researcher to explore participants' views in depth, to vary question order, and to use probing questions when clarification or elaboration was needed [8]. The interview guide was developed as an original instrument grounded in a preliminary review of seven relevant empirical studies, and it was refined through two pilot interviews conducted to check question clarity and effectiveness in eliciting the necessary data. The guide was structured into three thematic axes. The first addressed demographic and professional background. The second focused on gender as social identity, including family support, personal and family obligations, and the perceived role of gendered expectations and role models. The third examined participants' perceptions of the principal's duties and the perceived compatibility of leadership with pedagogical work and work life balance. Questions were explicitly aligned with the two research questions, with items 7 to 12 focusing on gendered expectations and stereotypes and items 13 to 18 focusing on perceptions of leadership responsibilities and their influence on leadership aspirations. Interviews were conducted online in order to ensure procedural consistency, and participants were asked for permission to record the session, either via video or audio depending on consent. The guide was designed so that the interview would not exceed 30 minutes, while the participant information sheet indicated an expected duration of approximately 45 minutes, reflecting allowance for fuller elaboration.

Ethical safeguards were implemented through an information sheet and written consent form. Participation was voluntary, interviews were anonymized, and participants were informed that their statements could be used in research outputs without disclosure of identity. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time without providing justification. The study addressed trustworthiness through attention to the validity and reliability of the research tool and process. Validity was supported by grounding the interview questions in the conceptual definitions derived from the literature review and by organizing questions systematically to address each research question. Reliability was approached through ensuring clarity of wording, maintaining stable conditions of

data collection via the same online format, and adopting a neutral stance during interviews to minimize influence on participants' responses.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach aimed at identifying recurring patterns of meaning across the interview material, without restricting interpretation solely to the predefined research questions^[11]. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to support familiarization and the identification of segments relevant to the phenomenon under study. Initial coding was then applied to text units sharing similar content, followed by the organization of codes into broader thematic categories to support interpretive structuring of the findings. A code and theme table was developed to document emerging topics, and results were subsequently presented in relation to the thematic axes and research questions. The analytic process was considered complete when further examination of the material did not yield new or different insights, indicating data saturation^[12].

3. Results

3.1. Gendered social roles and expectations as a framework for leadership decisions

3.1.1 Differential scrutiny and the experience of a double standard

Across interviews, participants described a persistent sense that women leaders are evaluated through a stricter and more demanding lens than men, even when the formal role requirements are identical. This perceived asymmetry was expressed directly in the accounts, where the gender of the principal was associated with heightened monitoring of behavior, decisions, and leadership presence. As one participant stated, "Female principals are often judged more harshly". A second participant articulated the same pattern through a comparison of how the same leadership trait is decoded differently depending on gender, noting that "Strictness in a man is seen as a leadership asset, whereas in a woman it is often misunderstood". These testimonies indicate that legitimacy and authority are not simply a function of position but are negotiated socially, through expectations that remain gendered and often disadvantage women in managerial roles.

3.1.2 Negotiating "strict" leadership and the boundaries of socially coded femininity

Participants did not present leadership style as a purely technical choice. Instead, leadership style was described as constrained by broader cultural scripts about what is considered acceptable for women. A participant noted that "Some women may find it difficult to adopt a stricter management style...", implying that adopting a firm or directive stance may generate discomfort or may be perceived as incompatible with socially prescribed femininity. This finding suggests that leadership is experienced as a field of constant calibration, where women are expected to demonstrate competence and decisiveness while simultaneously avoiding behaviors that may trigger negative gendered interpretations.

3.1.3 Persistence of gendered perceptions alongside gradual change

Although participants identified ongoing discrimination, they also recognized incremental shifts in attitudes. This ambivalence was captured in the statement "Social

perceptions still discriminate, although this is gradually changing". The phrasing is analytically important because it frames gender inequality not as an absolute, static condition but as a lived reality marked by partial progress and continuing exclusions. Within this perspective, women's leadership becomes both more visible and, at the same time, still contested through everyday evaluative practices.

3.1.4 Absence of female role models and the production of internal inhibitions

A prominent barrier was not only external judgement but also the internal restraints that participants linked to social expectations and limited representation. One participant stated, "The absence of female role models initially made me hesitate", explicitly connecting underrepresentation to hesitation and delayed willingness to claim authority. The same participant added a broader formulation of the mechanism through which social norms become internalized, emphasizing that "Social expectations can create internal inhibitions". Together, these statements indicate that gendered inequality operates simultaneously at the level of public recognition and at the level of self-positioning, where women's aspirations and self-confidence can be shaped by what appears thinkable or achievable within the profession.

3.1.5 Family support as an enabling condition for leadership pursuit

In contrast to the barriers described above, family support was presented as a decisive enabling factor. Support was framed in both immediate and intergenerational terms, including encouragement from spouse and children and supportive attitudes from the family of origin. One participant noted, "My husband and my children stood by me at every step", indicating a form of emotional and practical backing that legitimized and sustained leadership aspirations. Another emphasized the role of the family of origin through the statement "My parents were always in favor of education and personal development", while a related testimony described support as trust rather than pressure, "My family of origin supported me mainly with trust, without pressure or discouragement". These narratives suggest that family support operates as a resource that can offset social constraints by reducing guilt, reinforcing confidence, and enabling the reallocation of time and responsibilities necessary for leadership work.

3.1.6 The role of family obligations and the perceived advantage of fewer domestic responsibilities

Participants also described how the presence or absence of family obligations shapes the feasibility of leadership. This relationship was expressed both as a challenge that can be managed and as a structural advantage when obligations are fewer. One participant stated, "At times, yes, but with proper organization I managed", indicating that domestic responsibilities can function as a constraint, yet not an absolute barrier, when strategic planning is possible. Another participant described time availability as a decisive factor, "Having time available helped me to seriously consider a position of responsibility", presenting leadership as an option that becomes more realistic when time is less fragmented. A further account made the mechanism explicit by linking lack of obligations to greater professional dedication, while also recognizing an affective cost: "I do

not have family obligations, so I can devote myself more to my work. This works positively, but sometimes it also feels lonely". This dual framing shows that "availability" is not simply a neutral condition but a lived arrangement with benefits and social emotional tradeoffs.

3.2. Professional identity of the principal and the perceived nature of leadership work

3.2.1. Leadership as administration and the dominance of managerial workload

Participants described the principalship as shaped by an intense administrative burden that reconfigures the role into managerial coordination rather than educational leadership in the narrower pedagogical sense. This perception was summarized in the statement "The principal functions more as a manager". The formulation indicates a shift of professional identity, where the principal is positioned as an administrator responsible for procedures, documentation, and continuous organizational demands. This representation is consistent with further testimony highlighting the time-consuming nature of administrative tasks, including the view that "Administrative work is demanding and absorbs significant time". Such accounts suggest that the attractiveness of leadership is mediated by how the role is institutionally organized and by the extent to which it is experienced as bureaucratic saturation rather than pedagogical direction.

3.2.2. Administrative attention as displacement from teaching and pedagogical relationships

Beyond workload intensity, participants described administration as actively displacing principals from the classroom and from direct pedagogical engagement. One participant stated, "Administration constantly demands your attention and takes you away from the classroom". This statement frames the issue not as occasional overload but as structural and continuous. It implies that leadership is experienced as a role that competes with, and potentially erodes, a teacher's pedagogical identity and daily contact with students. The finding is significant for understanding why leadership may be approached with ambivalence, particularly among educators who prioritize teaching and relational connection as core professional values.

3.2.3. Maintaining pedagogical continuity as a deliberate identity strategy

Despite the perceived displacement described above, a counter narrative emerged that framed pedagogical connection as an intentional commitment that can be protected through personal strategies. This position was

expressed in the statement "I always find a way to stay connected to the pedagogical work". The claim suggests that, for some principals, maintaining pedagogical identity becomes a form of professional resistance to administrative dominance. Analytically, this subtheme indicates that women principals may not accept the managerial framing of leadership as inevitable but may attempt to sustain a hybrid identity that combines administrative responsibility with ongoing pedagogical presence.

3.2.4. Work life balance as conditional on time management, shared responsibilities, and school culture

Work life balance emerged as a decisive condition shaping leadership willingness and sustainability. Participants framed balance as contingent on practical arrangements, interpersonal understanding, and the institutional culture within which leadership is enacted. At the individual level, time management was described as essential, as captured in the statement "It requires very good time management and understanding". At the household level, shared responsibilities were described as enabling leadership pursuit, "In practice, we shared responsibilities and that allowed me to pursue it". At the organizational level, participants explicitly connected feasibility to the support available and the norms within the school environment, "It depends on the support one has, but also on the school's culture. It is not always easy". Taken together, these accounts frame work life balance not as an individualized issue of resilience but as an interaction between personal practices, family arrangements, and institutional conditions.

3.2.5. Perceived strengths of women leaders as relational and organisational capacities

Participants described women's effectiveness in leadership through a cluster of relational and organizational qualities. These qualities were not presented as fixed traits but as capacities that support everyday management of people, communication, and conflict. One participant stated, "Empathy, organization, patience, and flexibility are key elements", while another emphasized "Methodicalness, communication, and consistency". A further account highlighted the social and mediating dimension of leadership, "The ability to listen, to mediate, and to inspire colleagues...", and another reinforced the centrality of consistency, empathy, and communication, "Consistency, empathy, and communication". These testimonies indicate that participants construct a model of leadership grounded in relational labor and coordination, suggesting that the legitimacy of women leaders is also supported through an emphasis on interpersonal competence, trust building, and communicative authority.

Table 1: Gendered Scrutiny, Role Models, Family Conditions, and the Administrative Demands of Secondary School Principalship

Consolidated thematic cluster	Summary finding
Gendered legitimacy work in leadership	Women principals described a persistent double standard, where authority is evaluated more strictly and "acceptable" leadership behaviors are read through gendered expectations.
Role models and internalized constraints	Limited visibility of female role models was linked to hesitation and self-restraint, showing how external norms can become internal inhibitions.
Family-related conditions shaping feasibility	Family support enabled leadership pursuit, while domestic obligations and time availability structured how realistic and sustainable the role felt.
Principalship image and sustainability of the role	The principalship was constructed as administratively dominated and often distancing leaders from pedagogy, with work-life balance framed as conditional on time management, shared responsibilities, and school culture.

4. Discussion: This study set out to address two questions: how women principals perceive the role of their gender in

relation to their decision to assume a position of responsibility in secondary education, and how their images

of the principal role and its demands shape that intention. The interviews suggest that women's leadership aspirations and everyday legitimacy are negotiated within a gendered economy of expectations, where the same behaviors are read differently depending on whether they are performed by men or women. Participants described being evaluated "more strictly" and framed "strictness" as a trait that is recognized as leadership when embodied by men but becomes suspect when embodied by women. One principal expressed this contrast directly: "Strictness in a man is considered a leadership asset, whereas in a woman it is often misunderstood." This pattern aligns with contemporary international evidence that women leaders in education continue to face visibility and credibility gaps, despite formal equality frameworks, because leadership norms remain implicitly masculinized in many organizational cultures [13]. It also resonates with research explaining women's underrepresentation in principalship partly through demand-side mechanisms such as double standards in evaluation and promotion processes [14].

Beyond external judgements, participants also pointed to internal restraints shaped by social expectations. The thematic data include the observation that "social expectations can create internal inhibitions," alongside testimony that the "absence of female role models" initially generated hesitation. These findings matter because they indicate that gender operates not only through overt discrimination but also through anticipatory self-regulation, where women assess the personal costs of exposure to skepticism, scrutiny, and reputational risk. At a system level, UNESCO's 2025 Gender Report emphasizes that gender disparities persist in education leadership and that women's pathways to leadership are constrained by structural and cultural barriers, including stereotypes about authority and competence [15]. The present findings contribute a situated account of how such barriers are experienced as both social pressure and an internalized sense of needing to "fit" a leadership template.

A further layer in the decision to pursue leadership concerned the work–family interface. Participants described family responsibilities as a potential barrier but also emphasized that shared domestic labor and supportive family relationships could make leadership feasible. One principal noted: "Sometimes family obligations are an obstacle, but with proper organization I managed," while another stated: "In practice, we shared responsibilities and that allowed me to pursue the position". These accounts suggest that "choice" is conditional on the availability of practical support and on the capacity to manage time across competing domains, rather than on aspiration alone. Recent evidence from the principalship literature similarly links long working hours and role overload with work–life imbalance and risks of burnout and turnover, indicating that workload is not merely a professional issue but a determinant of leadership sustainability [16].

Participants repeatedly described the principal role as split between pedagogical leadership and administrative management, with the latter often experienced as expansive and consuming. The thematic analysis records that "administrative work is demanding and absorbs significant time," and one participant stated: "Administration constantly demands your attention and draws you away from the classroom". Another captured the identity shift succinctly: "The principal functions more as a manager".

Yet, participants simultaneously articulated a strong need to preserve pedagogical contact, as in: "I always find a way to remain connected to the pedagogical work". This tension is not only personal but institutional. The OECD's Results from TALIS 2024 underline that workload pressures and the organization of work remain central issues across systems, with implications for well-being, retention, and the capacity to focus on core educational aims [17].

Participants often described leadership through qualities such as empathy, communication, mediation, patience, organization, flexibility, and the ability to inspire colleagues. These accounts can be read in two ways. On one hand, they indicate forms of leadership that are widely recognized as effective in school improvement, staff cohesion, and conflict management, especially in complex school environments. On the other hand, they may also reflect adaptive strategies developed under conditions where women leaders are socially expected to be emotionally available and collaborative, and where deviation from these expectations can carry reputational costs. Large-scale syntheses of women's educational leadership note that women leaders are frequently rendered less visible in dominant narratives of leadership, even while they enact high-impact leadership practices, and that recognition gaps persist despite evidence of effectiveness [13]. In the present study, participants' emphasis on relational competence appears tightly connected to legitimacy work: building trust and minimizing resistance may be especially salient when authority is culturally coded as male.

Taken together, this body of work indicates that current educational change is driven by convergent agendas combining transdisciplinary curriculum design, technology-enhanced and AI-supported pedagogy, inclusive provision, and culturally responsive learning, which collectively broaden the scope of what school leadership must coordinate by requiring coherent cross-disciplinary implementation, sustained professional collaboration, and ethically grounded innovation alongside commitments to quality and equity in diverse school communities [18–21]. At the same time, research foregrounding embodied, and holistic pedagogies underscores that leadership also entails legitimizing interdisciplinary teaching, resourcing creative curriculum development, and maintaining shared orientation toward wider developmental goals rather than narrowly defined attainment metrics [22–25]. Within this landscape, inclusion remains a structural priority, since evidence on assistive and digital technologies and on governance in special education suggests that equitable access depends less on tools alone than on organizational capacity, policy enactment, and school-level leadership able to align resources, expertise, and support arrangements into coherent support infrastructures [26–27].

Despite the value of the present study in providing in-depth and context-sensitive insight into women principals' perceptions and experiences, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research was designed as a small-scale qualitative inquiry based on online semi-structured interviews with four women principals in Attica, and participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which restricts transferability and does not permit statistical generalization, even though it supports exploratory depth. In addition, the analysis relied on self-reported accounts, and the study did not include comparative perspectives such as male principals or other

school actors such as teachers whose evaluations of leadership could illuminate how gendered meanings are produced and negotiated across the broader school ecology. Future research should therefore build on these initial insights through larger qualitative samples across multiple regions, comparative designs that examine whether similar leadership behaviors are interpreted differently by gender, and mixed-method approaches combining interviews with workload diaries or organizational document analysis in order to specify more precisely how administrative demands shape time allocation and the enactment of pedagogical leadership.

5. Implications

The findings suggest that increasing women's participation and sustainability in principalship requires interventions that address both culture and working conditions. First, selection and evaluation processes for school leadership positions should be reviewed for implicit double standards. The mechanism identified in research on the gender gap in principalship, namely stricter bars for women in demand-side evaluation, implies the need for transparent criteria, structured assessment procedures, and accountability for bias in appointment processes ^[14]. Second, leadership development should not be limited to skill acquisition but should also include mentoring and visible role-model pathways that counteract internalized hesitation and normalize women's authority, in line with the global agenda emphasized in UNESCO's 2025 Gender Report ^[15].

Third, the administrative structure of the principal role needs redesign. Participants' accounts indicate that administrative overload can erode pedagogical identity and diminish the attractiveness of leadership. This supports the case for investing in administrative support capacity, clarifying role boundaries, and reducing avoidable bureaucratic demands, consistent with TALIS 2024's broader emphasis on workload as a system challenge affecting professional well-being ^[17]. Finally, supporting work-life balance is not a private matter but a leadership retention strategy. Evidence on principals' work hours and work-life balance indicates that role overload is a tangible driver of strain and turnover risk ^[16], which strengthens the argument for organizational protections such as distributed leadership practices, realistic workload expectations, and time-sensitive scheduling cultures.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that women's engagement with secondary school leadership is shaped by a persistent gendered landscape in which authority and legitimacy are negotiated through unequal expectations and evaluative double standards, while the absence of visible female role models can contribute to hesitation and internal restraints. At the same time, supportive family environments and the practical sharing of responsibilities appear to function as enabling conditions that make leadership pursuit and sustainability more feasible, particularly in relation to time demands and work life balance. Participants also described the principalship as increasingly dominated by administrative workload, a reality that can distance leaders from pedagogical work and require deliberate strategies to preserve a pedagogical professional identity. Overall, the study suggests that strengthening women's leadership in secondary education requires simultaneous attention to

cultural perceptions of gender and authority, as well as to organizational conditions, including administrative support, workload management, and school cultures that recognize relational and collaborative leadership as legitimate and effective.

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