A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Female School Principals in Their Relationships with Teachers

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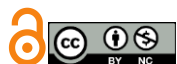* Corresponding author email address: s.maleki1@iaut.ac.ir

A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Objective: The objective of this study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of married female principals of girls' upper secondary schools in their professional relationships with teachers.
Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences. The research population consisted of married female principals working in public girls' upper secondary schools across the five educational districts of Tabriz. Participants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling based on defined criteria, including a minimum of five years of managerial experience, at least a master's degree, and having at least one child. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved with twelve participants. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured through prolonged engagement, member checking, careful transcription review, and consistency in coding and theme development.
Findings: Data analysis led to the extraction of three main categories reflecting the principals' lived experiences: low job motivation among teachers, the necessity of effective communication and mutual understanding, and teachers' personal problems affecting professional functioning. These categories encompassed experiences related to reduced responsibility, task avoidance, limited participation in school administration, resistance to professional updating, unprofessional behaviors, and the impact of family- and health-related issues such as childbirth and frequent absences.
Conclusion: The findings indicate that the leadership experiences of female school principals are deeply relational and shaped by ongoing efforts to balance empathy, accountability, and organizational effectiveness. Understanding these lived experiences can inform more context-sensitive leadership development and support strategies in secondary education.
Keywords: *Female school principals; lived experience; phenomenology; teacher relationships; secondary education; educational leadership*

1   Introduction

Educational leadership has increasingly been recognized as a decisive factor in shaping school effectiveness, teacher performance, and student outcomes, particularly in complex and rapidly changing educational environments. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that school leadership is no longer confined to administrative control or hierarchical authority, but rather involves relational, emotional, and communicative dimensions that directly influence teachers' professional engagement and organizational commitment (Miķelsone et al., 2024; Tan & Gümüş, 2024). Within this broader reconceptualization, the lived experiences of school principals have gained prominence as a critical source of insight into how leadership is enacted in practice, especially through daily interactions with teachers who constitute the core of instructional delivery in schools.

In recent decades, the presence of women in school leadership positions has expanded significantly across diverse cultural and national contexts. However, female principals often encounter leadership realities that differ in form and intensity from those of their male counterparts, shaped by gendered expectations, cultural norms, and work–family dynamics (Nkosi & Moyo, 2023; Washington & Gounko, 2024). Research has shown that women leaders frequently adopt relational, empathetic, and collaborative leadership approaches, which can foster trust and cohesion within school communities, yet they simultaneously face structural constraints, heightened emotional labor, and implicit bias that complicate their leadership roles (Khatib, 2022; Kultsum et al., 2022). These dynamics are particularly salient in their relationships with teachers, where authority, support, accountability, and understanding must be carefully balanced.

The literature on female school leadership highlights that principals' interactions with teachers are a central mechanism through which leadership influences school climate and instructional quality. Studies conducted in varied educational systems demonstrate that leadership styles adopted by female principals are closely linked to teachers' perceptions of power distance, motivation, and professional agency (Şahingöz, 2022; Tozlu & Hoşgörür, 2024). When principals are perceived as supportive, communicative, and fair, teachers are more likely to engage in collaborative decision-making and professional learning; conversely, weak communication and misaligned expectations can exacerbate disengagement and resistance

(Sawalhi & Chaaban, 2023; Tikiawati & Sulistyaningrum, 2025). These findings underscore the importance of examining leadership not only as a set of competencies, but as an ongoing relational experience embedded in everyday school life.

International research further suggests that female principals often operate as change leaders, navigating reform pressures, technological transformation, and demands for inclusive education while maintaining effective relationships with teaching staff (Alnuaimi & Opoku, 2024; Miķelsone et al., 2024). In developing and transitional contexts, these challenges are intensified by resource constraints, organizational instability, and sociocultural expectations surrounding gender roles (Ayaz, 2024; Pasaribu et al., 2023). Empirical evidence from such contexts illustrates that principals' success in managing teacher relations depends not only on formal authority, but also on their capacity for empathy, negotiation, and contextual understanding (Kamaludin, 2022; Oparaji et al., 2024). This body of work calls for deeper qualitative inquiry into how female principals themselves experience and interpret these relational demands.

From a phenomenological perspective, leadership is understood as something that is lived and experienced rather than merely enacted through formal roles or policies. Descriptive phenomenology, in particular, offers a rigorous framework for capturing the essence of participants' experiences as they are perceived and given meaning in specific contexts. Prior qualitative studies employing narrative and phenomenological approaches have revealed that women leaders often describe their leadership journeys through stories of negotiation, resilience, and emotional engagement, highlighting the inseparability of personal and professional identities (Lac & Diaz, 2022; Washington & Gounko, 2024). Such approaches are especially valuable in educational leadership research, where interpersonal relationships form the backbone of organizational functioning.

In the context of secondary education, relationships between principals and teachers are further complicated by increased curricular demands, accountability pressures, and adolescent students' developmental needs. Research indicates that instructional leadership behaviors, teacher supervision, and professional development initiatives are strongly influenced by the quality of principal–teacher relationships (Jang & Alexander, 2022; Lamsal, 2022). Female principals, in particular, may experience heightened expectations to be simultaneously authoritative leaders and

emotionally available supporters, a dual role that can generate tension and role strain (Lee, 2022; Nkosi & Moyo, 2023). Understanding how these leaders experience such expectations in their daily interactions with teachers is therefore essential for developing more context-sensitive leadership models.

Within Middle Eastern and Asian contexts, studies have begun to explore culturally embedded leadership patterns among female principals, pointing to the interaction between national culture, organizational norms, and leadership practice (Kamaludin, 2022; Khatib, 2022). These studies suggest that female leaders often engage in adaptive strategies to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness, particularly when managing teacher relationships in environments characterized by hierarchical traditions. At the same time, emerging research highlights the growing importance of participatory leadership, shared decision-making, and technological competence in modern schools (Nazari Ardabili et al., 2024; Sadeghi & Shafie Pour Motlagh, 2025). Teachers' expectations for involvement and professional respect further shape principals' relational experiences, reinforcing the need for in-depth qualitative exploration.

Despite the expanding body of literature on female educational leadership, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing research relies on quantitative designs that measure leadership styles, competencies, or outcomes, often overlooking the subjective meanings and lived realities of principals themselves (DİLber et al., 2022; Rasouli et al., 2024). Moreover, while teacher perspectives on leadership have been widely studied, fewer investigations have centered on how female principals experience their relationships with teachers, particularly within specific cultural and organizational contexts. This gap is especially evident in Iranian secondary education, where sociocultural expectations, family responsibilities, and institutional structures intersect in complex ways.

Recent Iranian and regional studies emphasize the need to contextualize leadership research within local educational systems and cultural frameworks (Nazari Ardabili et al., 2024; Rasouli et al., 2024). As schools increasingly face demands for sustainability, innovation, and equity, understanding the experiential foundations of leadership becomes crucial for informing professional development and policy. Examining the lived experiences of married female principals is particularly important, as their leadership practices are often shaped by simultaneous responsibilities in professional and family domains, which

can influence how they relate to teachers, manage conflicts, and exercise authority.

In light of these considerations, a descriptive phenomenological approach provides a suitable methodological lens for uncovering the essence of female principals' experiences in their interactions with teachers. By focusing on their narratives and meanings, such an approach can illuminate dimensions of leadership that remain obscured in survey-based research, including emotional challenges, moral dilemmas, and contextual constraints (Sawalhi & Chaaban, 2023; Washington & Gounko, 2024). These insights can contribute to more nuanced leadership preparation programs and support mechanisms tailored to the realities of women in school leadership roles.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of married female principals of girls' upper secondary schools in their relationships with teachers, in order to uncover the essential structure of these experiences within the educational context of Tabriz.

2   Methods and Materials

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in descriptive phenomenology. This methodological orientation was selected because its primary objective is to produce a rich and comprehensive description of a lived phenomenon in order to uncover and articulate its essential structure. In this research, the phenomenon under investigation was the lived experience of married female school principals in managing schools, with particular emphasis on their professional relationships with teachers. The focus was not on evaluating managerial performance or outcomes, but rather on understanding how these women experienced, perceived, and made meaning of their day-to-day interactions with teachers within the context of school leadership. Given its aim of generating applied knowledge that can inform educational practice and policy, the study was classified as applied research in terms of purpose.

The research setting comprised public girls' upper secondary schools located across the five educational districts of Tabriz, Iran. The target population included married female principals working in these schools who possessed substantial professional and managerial experience. Participant selection was carried out through purposive sampling, guided by clearly defined inclusion criteria that were theoretically relevant to the phenomenon

under study. Eligible participants were required to be married, to have a minimum of five years of experience in a school principalship role, to hold at least a master's degree, and to have at least one child. These criteria were intended to ensure that participants had sufficient personal, familial, and professional experience to reflect deeply on the complexities of balancing school leadership responsibilities and interpersonal relationships with teachers.

Sampling proceeded theoretically and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer yielded new meanings, themes, or insights relevant to the research question. Saturation was reached after interviewing twelve participants, whose backgrounds varied in terms of academic discipline, length of service, managerial experience, number of children, and educational district. This diversity contributed to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon while remaining consistent with phenomenological principles that prioritize depth and richness of experience over sample size.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which are widely regarded as an appropriate and effective tool in phenomenological research. An initial interview framework was developed with the consultation of subject-matter experts and was explicitly designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences of school management in relation to teachers. The content of the interview guide was informed by a preliminary exploratory review, as well as by an examination of relevant theoretical foundations and existing literature on female educational leadership and lived experience. This process ensured that the interview questions were both theoretically grounded and sufficiently open-ended to allow participants to express their experiences in their own terms.

Interviews encouraged participants to describe concrete situations, feelings, challenges, and interpretations associated with their interactions with teachers, rather than offering abstract opinions or generalized judgments. Throughout the data collection process, attention was paid to creating a supportive and respectful interview environment, enabling participants to speak freely and reflectively. Interviews were conducted until sufficient depth was achieved in each account, and all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To ensure the rigor of the qualitative inquiry, established criteria for trustworthiness were carefully addressed. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement in the field and sustained interaction with participants, allowing the researcher to develop a deep familiarity with the research context. Member checking was employed by returning preliminary findings and interpretations to participants and asking them to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the extracted meanings. Participants' feedback was incorporated into the refinement of the findings, thereby strengthening their authenticity. In addition, the use of direct quotations from participants' narratives was emphasized as a means of grounding interpretations firmly in the data and enhancing the plausibility of the findings.

Dependability and confirmability were addressed through careful documentation of the research process and continuous review of interview transcripts and analytic decisions. Transcriptions were repeatedly checked to minimize errors, and the coding process was subjected to ongoing comparison and review to ensure internal consistency. Agreement in coding and interpretation was sought to the highest possible degree, thereby reinforcing the stability and reliability of the analytic outcomes.

Data analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological method, which is specifically designed to capture the essence of lived experience in a systematic and transparent manner. Initially, all interview transcripts were read repeatedly in their entirety in order to gain a holistic sense of the participants' experiences and to become fully immersed in the data. This stage allowed the researcher to approach the material with openness and sensitivity, setting aside preconceived assumptions as much as possible.

Subsequently, significant statements and phrases that were directly related to the phenomenon of interest were identified and extracted from each transcript. These statements were then examined carefully to formulate meanings, a process that involved interpreting the underlying significance of participants' words while remaining faithful to their original expressions. This step resulted in a set of formulated meanings that reflected the core aspects of participants' lived experiences.

The formulated meanings were then organized into clusters of themes by identifying patterns, similarities, and relationships among them. These thematic clusters were continually checked against the original transcripts to ensure that they were firmly grounded in participants' narratives and did not distort or oversimplify the data. Following this, the results of the analysis were integrated into an exhaustive and comprehensive description of the phenomenon,

capturing the full range and depth of experiences reported by the participants.

From this comprehensive description, the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, often referred to as its essential structure, was articulated in a clear and concise statement. This structure represented the invariant aspects of the lived experience of female school principals in their relationships with teachers. In the final step, the researcher returned to the participants, either through follow-up interviews or additional consultations, to seek their perspectives on the findings and to conduct a final validation of the results. This iterative process of verification ensured that the final interpretation accurately reflected the participants' experiences and meanings, thereby enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the study.

3 Findings and Results

The participants consisted of twelve married female principals working in public girls' upper secondary schools across the five educational districts of Tabriz. All participants held at least a master's degree, with academic backgrounds including educational management, curriculum planning, English language, physics, Persian literature, and jurisprudence and law. One participant held a doctoral degree, while the remaining participants had master's-level qualifications. Their total years of service ranged from 26 to 35 years, reflecting extensive professional experience in the education system. Managerial experience varied between 8 and 22 years, indicating long-term engagement in leadership roles. All participants were mothers, with the number of children ranging from one to three. The distribution of participants across the five districts ensured representation of diverse organizational and contextual school environments, thereby enriching the breadth of lived experiences captured in the study.

Table 1

Lived Experiences of Female Principals in Relation to Teachers

Main Category	Subcategory
Low Level of Job Motivation	Low work motivation
	Low sense of responsibility
	Avoidance of assigned duties
Need for Effective Communication with Colleagues	Lack of participation in school administration
	Inattention to up-to-date professional knowledge
	Unprofessional behaviors
	Need for understanding teachers' conditions
Teachers' Personal Problems	Problems related to childbirth
	Frequent absences due to out-of-school issues

Female principals described low job motivation among some teachers as a significant challenge affecting daily school management. This lack of motivation was manifested in diminished enthusiasm for teaching tasks, reduced commitment to instructional quality, and a general sense of disengagement from professional responsibilities. Principals emphasized that low motivation was often accompanied by a weakened sense of responsibility, whereby teachers showed limited accountability for student outcomes or school goals. In some cases, this condition led to avoidance behaviors, including reluctance to perform assigned duties or resistance to additional responsibilities beyond minimum requirements. Participants perceived this pattern as a source of tension in their leadership role, as it required continuous monitoring, follow-up, and emotional labor to sustain acceptable levels of performance and collaboration.

Another central category reflected the principals' emphasis on the necessity of effective and constructive communication with teachers. Participants reported that insufficient participation by teachers in school administration and decision-making processes often hindered collective problem-solving and organizational cohesion. A lack of attention to updated pedagogical knowledge and professional development was also highlighted, with principals expressing concern about resistance to change and innovation. Additionally, unprofessional behaviors, such as inappropriate interpersonal conduct or disregard for organizational norms, were described as complicating leadership interactions. Despite these challenges, principals stressed the importance of understanding teachers' perspectives and conditions, noting that empathetic communication and mutual respect

were essential strategies for managing conflicts and fostering a cooperative school climate.

Principals also referred to teachers' personal and family-related issues as an influential factor in their professional interactions. Problems associated with childbirth and postnatal responsibilities were frequently mentioned, particularly in relation to physical strain, emotional vulnerability, and the need for flexible work arrangements. Furthermore, repeated absences stemming from issues outside the school environment, such as family obligations or personal crises, were described as creating organizational disruptions and increasing the managerial burden on principals. While participants acknowledged the legitimacy of these challenges, they also highlighted the difficulty of balancing empathy and support for teachers with the necessity of maintaining continuity, discipline, and educational quality within the school.

4 Discussion

The findings of the present study provide a nuanced and experience-based understanding of how married female principals perceive and interpret their relationships with teachers within the context of girls' upper secondary schools. One of the central findings was the principals' recurrent experience of low job motivation among some teachers, which manifested in reduced responsibility, avoidance of assigned duties, and limited engagement with school affairs. From the participants' perspectives, this motivational decline was not merely an individual shortcoming, but a relational and organizational phenomenon that directly shaped their leadership experience. This interpretation aligns with international evidence suggesting that teachers' motivation is closely tied to leadership quality, organizational climate, and perceived support from school principals (Sawalhi & Chaaban, 2023; Tan & Gümüş, 2024). Female principals in this study experienced the burden of sustaining motivation as an emotionally demanding aspect of their role, echoing findings that women leaders often engage in heightened emotional labor when addressing staff disengagement (Nkosi & Moyo, 2023; Washington & Gounko, 2024).

The principals' emphasis on low responsibility and task avoidance among teachers can be understood in light of studies that highlight the importance of clear expectations, shared vision, and participatory leadership in fostering teacher accountability. Research indicates that when teachers perceive leadership as distant or inconsistent, their

sense of ownership over school goals diminishes (Oparaji et al., 2024; Tikiawati & Sulistyaningrum, 2025). In contrast, female principals are often expected to balance authority with empathy, which may complicate the enforcement of accountability. The lived experiences described in this study suggest that principals frequently found themselves negotiating between maintaining professional standards and preserving relational harmony, a tension also noted in studies on female leadership styles across different cultural contexts (Şahingöz, 2022; Tozlu & Hoşgörür, 2024).

Another prominent finding concerned the perceived necessity of effective communication and mutual understanding between principals and teachers. Participants described limited teacher participation in school administration, resistance to updating professional knowledge, and instances of unprofessional behavior as persistent challenges in their leadership experience. These findings resonate with prior research emphasizing that teacher involvement in decision-making processes enhances commitment and reduces resistance to change (Pasaribu et al., 2023; Tikiawati & Sulistyaningrum, 2025). The principals' accounts suggest that when teachers remain disengaged from collective governance, principals experience leadership as a solitary and burdensome endeavor, reinforcing the relational dimension of school management highlighted in contemporary leadership models (Kamaludin, 2022; Miķelsone et al., 2024).

The experience of encountering resistance to new knowledge and innovation is particularly significant in the context of ongoing educational reforms and technological transformation. Studies have shown that principals increasingly function as change leaders who must guide teachers through pedagogical and technological shifts (Miķelsone et al., 2024; Nazari Ardabili et al., 2024). The principals in this study perceived teachers' indifference toward professional development as a source of frustration and as an obstacle to school improvement. This finding aligns with research indicating that leadership effectiveness is closely linked to the principal's ability to cultivate a learning-oriented culture among teachers (Lamsal, 2022; Lee, 2022). However, the lived experiences reported here suggest that such cultivation is emotionally taxing, particularly for female principals who often rely on relational persuasion rather than coercive authority.

Unprofessional behaviors and communication difficulties further complicated principals' experiences, reinforcing the importance of interpersonal competence in school leadership. Previous studies have demonstrated that

leadership styles emphasizing respect, dialogue, and inclusivity are associated with more positive teacher perceptions and lower power distance (Khatib, 2022; Tozlu & Hoşgörür, 2024). The principals' narratives in this study indicate that they were acutely aware of teachers' sensitivities and contextual pressures, which motivated them to adopt understanding and empathetic approaches even in the face of challenging behaviors. This tendency reflects findings that female principals often prioritize relational and ethical considerations in their leadership practice (Kultsum et al., 2022; Washington & Gounko, 2024).

A third major category emerging from the findings was teachers' personal problems and their impact on professional interactions. Participants frequently referred to issues related to childbirth, family responsibilities, and repeated absences due to external factors. These experiences highlight the intersection of personal life and professional functioning within schools, particularly in female-dominated educational contexts. Research conducted in various cultural settings has shown that women leaders are often expected to demonstrate heightened empathy toward staff members' personal circumstances, which can blur professional boundaries (Ayaz, 2024; Nkosi & Moyo, 2023). The principals in this study described the challenge of balancing compassion with organizational discipline, a dilemma that significantly shaped their lived experience of leadership.

The impact of teachers' personal challenges on school functioning has been discussed in the literature as a critical issue for managerial effectiveness. Studies indicate that frequent absences and reduced availability disrupt instructional continuity and increase administrative workload for principals (Oparaji et al., 2024; Rasouli et al., 2024). The findings of the present study extend this literature by illustrating how such disruptions are experienced subjectively by female principals, who often internalize responsibility for maintaining stability and fairness. This internalization is consistent with research suggesting that women leaders are more likely to perceive organizational problems as personal leadership challenges, thereby intensifying emotional strain (Nkosi & Moyo, 2023; Washington & Gounko, 2024).

Importantly, the principals' experiences must be interpreted within the broader sociocultural and organizational context of Iranian secondary education. Studies on leadership in Middle Eastern and developing contexts emphasize that principals operate within hierarchical structures, strong cultural norms, and limited resources, which constrain leadership choices (Ayaz, 2024;

Khatib, 2022). At the same time, emerging research in Iran highlights a growing emphasis on competency-based leadership, sustainability, and technological empowerment (Rasouli et al., 2024; Sadeghi & Shafie Pour Motlagh, 2025). The lived experiences captured in this study suggest that female principals navigate these competing demands through relational strategies, seeking to preserve cohesion while responding to systemic expectations.

5 Conclusion

Taken together, the findings of this study reinforce the argument that school leadership, particularly for women, is fundamentally relational and experiential. While prior quantitative studies have established links between leadership styles and outcomes such as teacher performance or student achievement (Jang & Alexander, 2022; Lee, 2022), the present phenomenological analysis reveals the emotional and interpretive dimensions underlying these relationships. By foregrounding principals' lived experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how leadership challenges are perceived, negotiated, and given meaning in everyday school life. This experiential insight complements existing models of educational leadership and underscores the need for leadership development approaches that address not only skills and competencies, but also emotional resilience and relational awareness (Alnuaimi & Opoku, 2024; Miķelsone et al., 2024).

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample was limited to married female principals of girls' upper secondary schools in a single city, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other educational levels, regions, or to male principals. In addition, the reliance on self-reported interview data means that the findings reflect participants' subjective interpretations, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Finally, the phenomenological design prioritizes depth over breadth, and therefore does not allow for statistical generalization of the results.

Future studies could expand this line of inquiry by including female principals from different educational levels, regions, and school types, as well as by comparing their experiences with those of male principals. Longitudinal qualitative designs could provide insight into how principals' experiences with teachers evolve over time, particularly in response to policy changes or professional

development initiatives. In addition, mixed-methods studies combining phenomenological findings with quantitative measures of organizational climate or teacher engagement could offer a more comprehensive understanding of principal–teacher relationships.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of providing targeted support for female school principals that addresses the relational and emotional dimensions of leadership. Professional development programs should include training in communication, conflict management, and emotional self-care, alongside managerial and instructional leadership skills. Educational policymakers and supervisors can also play a role by creating supportive structures that acknowledge teachers' personal challenges while maintaining clear organizational expectations. Such measures may help principals foster more collaborative and motivated teacher communities while sustaining their own well-being and leadership effectiveness.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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