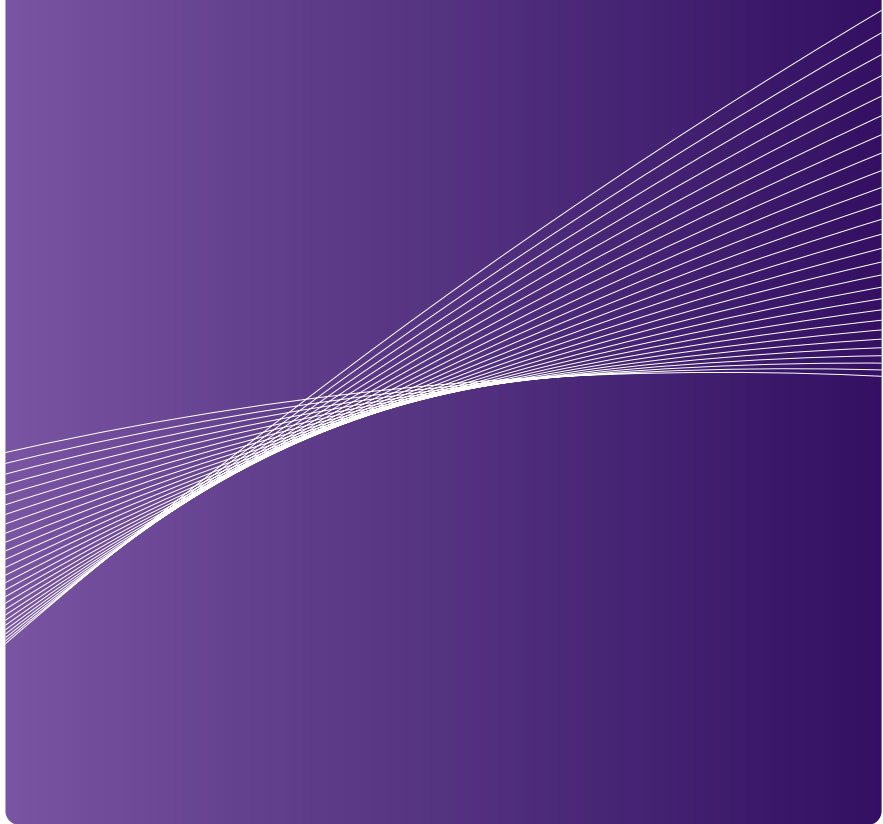


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# Gender and headship in the 21st century



## Introduction

As part of its commitment to encouraging the leadership development of underrepresented groups in education and to building leadership capacity in schools, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has been developing activities to support the leadership development of women. NCSL is currently undertaking a gender audit of its Leading from the Middle programme in order to consider implications and recommendations for all leadership programmes. A pilot programme entitled Taking Women's Leadership Forward begins in March 2005. It is aimed at women who wish to make the transition into senior leadership positions in schools. The Taking Women's Leadership Forward pilot programme builds on the findings of this research paper into gender and headship in the 21st century.

This paper summarises the main findings of a survey into the gender-related experiences of male and female headteachers, undertaken on behalf of NCSL by the Institute of Education, University of London, in 2004. It also draws upon the findings of a number of broadly similar surveys into these issues, conducted during the 1990s.

A fuller description of the findings from these surveys is contained in a separate report by Dr Marianne Coleman of the Institute of Education, and is available on the NCSL website at [www.ncsl.org.uk/twlf](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/twlf)

### Gender and leadership in schools: the key facts

Recent years have seen an increase in the proportion of women reaching headship and deputy headship. For instance, figures from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (figure 1) show that from 1997 to 2002, the proportion of women in:

- secondary headship rose from 26 per cent to 31 per cent
- nursery and primary headship rose from 56 per cent to 62 per cent
- special school and pupil referral unit (PRU) headship rose from 41 per cent to 47 per cent

Despite these recent trends, men continue to be overrepresented in senior leadership roles in schools in all phases.

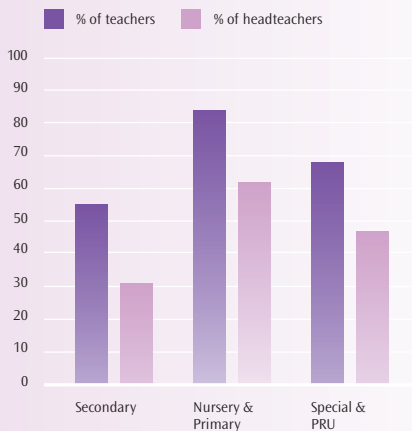


Fig 1. Proportions of female teachers and female headteachers by phase in 2002 (source DfES, 2004)

## Barriers to headship

About half of the female secondary headteachers that were surveyed reported experiencing gender discrimination in their career progress. Most commonly, this related to their family responsibilities but also to the perception that men are simply preferred as leaders.

Female headteachers reported concerns about the appointment process for headship, particularly that many boards of governors are perceived to be looking for a male headteacher. Such experiences appear to be less common than was the case in the past, but do continue to be a major area of concern. Appointment boards usually include a majority of men.

Considerable differences exist between regions in the proportion of female secondary headteachers. London and Birmingham have more than 40 per cent and the North and South West have 23 per cent.

There appears to have been some reduction in the amount of gender stereotyping that takes place in secondary schools in recent years. The identification of women with pastoral responsibilities and men with curriculum responsibilities was prevalent in the past, but is now much less common. However, some stereotyping still continues, particularly in headship appointments where women remain most underrepresented in secondary schools and men report some resistance to their working in early years.

The way in which career breaks for childbirth and childcare are regarded and managed is a significant issue and can operate as a barrier to headship for women in teaching.

Women are more likely than men to doubt their abilities to serve as headteachers. Women also appear to be less likely to plan their careers.

Mentoring and the existence of role models are particularly important for potential female headteachers.

## Gender-related work–life balance

The job of headteacher is demanding and stressful and requires long hours of work. Although work–life balance issues are important for all, they tend to impact more on women, who usually bear more domestic responsibility than men. As a result, women are more likely than men to take their domestic situation into account when considering whether or not to apply for headship.

It would appear that some women have had to make choices between their careers and domestic life. The proportion of female secondary headteachers with children is higher than it was in the 1990s (60 per cent compared to 50 per cent). However, female secondary headteachers remain far less likely to have children than their male colleagues (60 per cent compared to 90 per cent). Female headteachers from all sectors are also still more likely to be single, divorced or separated than their male counterparts.

The majority of male headteachers enjoy the support of partners who take responsibility for domestic arrangements. Domestic demands on female headteachers in general have eased slightly since the 1990s, with a third of those who have partners reporting that they took a more equal share of such responsibilities.

Women are much more likely than men to have to change jobs to follow their partner. About a quarter of the partners of female secondary heads and about half the partners of male secondary heads have moved to follow them.

Female primary school headteachers are more likely to be the main breadwinner than women secondary headteachers, and the greater number of primary schools to secondary in the country means that primary headteachers are less likely to move from one region to another, putting demands on their partner to change jobs and follow them. Female primary headteachers seem to be working in a more family friendly environment than that of their secondary colleagues. Many more of them have partners and children. However, the difficulties of combining the care of young children with a demanding job remain a major issue for women in both sectors. About 40 per cent of female headteachers have taken maternity leave, with many finding it too short and with negative financial implications.

## The impact of gender on the working life of headteachers

About half of female secondary headteachers reported experiencing sexism in their work. This came mainly from the attitudes of governors, parents, visitors to the school, male colleagues who were likely to presume that a school leader would be male. Primary headteachers of both sexes were less likely to experience sexism, but some female primary headteachers did complain about the sexist nature of regional headteachers' meetings and of experiencing a sense that their views are not always heard. Many primary headteachers also continue to believe that there was a general preference for the idea of having a male headteacher rather than a female one.

A particular form of sexism that persists is the presumption that there is a pecking order of schools, at the top of which are larger secondary schools, which it is assumed must be led by a man, and that a female headteacher is presumed to be head of a primary school – probably a small one.

Some women also continue to experience sexist language and inappropriate comments about their appearance.

Both male and female headteachers are more likely to feel the need to prove themselves as leaders than was the case in the 1990s. However, for women (particularly women leading secondary schools), this need to prove themselves often contains an additional gender-based dynamic. For example, some female heads who were leading schools in special measures felt particularly vulnerable to criticism as female leaders.

Interestingly, outsider leaders (ie, female secondary headteachers and male primary headteachers) were often likely to see their sex as an advantage as a headteacher. For instance, female headteachers felt that they were able to defuse difficult situations and avoid aggression, and that they were able to empathise with the mothers of their students. Some women were also quite open about using feminine charms to obtain more for their school and relished the shock factor of being a woman in charge of a secondary school. For male primary headteachers, an advantage was seen to come from knowing that they were often preferred by governors and parents as head of the school.

## Differences in the leadership style of female and male headteachers

Headteachers were asked to describe how they viewed their leadership style. These views were not validated through research with their staff, but provide an interesting insight in their self-image and personal perception.

There were no significant differences in the descriptions that male and female respondents attached to their leadership style. These most commonly included:

open	collegiate	democratic
consultative	supportive	coaching
inclusive	collaborative	

Following these words in popularity, a second style emerged, which was more closely associated with the target-driven, potentially managerial style that may be more commonly demanded of today's leaders. These included:

decisive	visionary	challenging
determined	authoritative	strategic

The use of the more directive second style appears to be more common in secondary than primary schools and is much more common in 2004 than in the surveys of the 1990s. It is also slightly more common in women.

Despite these findings, headteachers remained acutely aware of the continued gender stereotyping of male and female leaders.

There was also little difference in the ways in which participants perceived their day-to-day leadership practice. More specifically, in terms of the ways in which they helped their staff to develop their careers, few heads gave targeted support to female staff, but those that did were most likely to be flexible over maternity arrangements. For all staff, the types of career development opportunities mentioned were much more creative and varied than they were in the 1990s.

## Recommendations for school leaders and governors and for national training programmes

1. It is important that governing bodies are fully aware of equal opportunities issues in the appointment of both women and men in secondary and primary schools. Governors in particular may be biased in favour of men and discriminate against women because of family responsibilities.
2. A positive development has been the relative equity for men and women that now exists in respect of senior roles in secondary schools prior to headship. However, it should be noted this has not always been extended to the role of acting headteacher.
3. The membership of interview panels in all types of schools is still weighted towards men and steps could be taken to remedy this.
4. There appear to be regionally based cultural barriers to the full acceptance of women as leaders. Equity issues could be addressed on a regional basis. There is also a need to recognise and address the masculine culture of some regional headteachers' meetings.
5. The way in which career breaks for childbirth and childcare are regarded and managed is a significant issue and requires further consideration. Central to this is the fact that it is generally more difficult for women to resume work at the same level after a career break than it is for men.
6. To accommodate work-life balance issues more fully, it is important to nurture a culture in the school that is tolerant in relation to families, particularly children and elderly dependants. There is a need to recognise that women are likely to be bearing most of the family and domestic responsibilities, particularly in primary schools, and to recognise and encourage paternity leave.
7. Mentoring, seen as vital in supporting aspirant female headteachers, has increased significantly in recent years, probably as a result of national training initiatives, and it is important that this continues.
8. Although women are less likely to be expected to take on stereotypical feminine roles, headteachers should remain sensitive to the need to expose aspiring school leaders to a range of management and leadership experience in order to increase their promotability.



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