Stress Management among Female Educational Managers and Administrators in Higher Education in Kazakhstan

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This study aims to examine the sources of stress that affect women in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan by exploring the influences of stress on their work performance. In addition, the study investigates the ways female administrators in Kazakhstan's higher education system cope with stress and manage it to perform better in their work environment. The study employed the qualitative research method utilizing semi-structured interviews with 10 female managers who work in one higher institution in the Astana metropolis. The study finds that female managers encounter issues of excessive workload, student issues, and management regulations reported as major sources of stress. However, the study identified some major factors that enhanced participants' techniques, such as friendly communication with colleagues, leisure, relaxation, and physical exercise. The findings also revealed how female administrators encounter excessive levels of stress which in turn affects their effective performance and productivity at the workplace. The study may help universities reduce the number of tasks assigned to female managers by recruiting more staff and supporting female administrators in organizing quarterly training to manage stress.

Keywords: Stress, Stress Management, Female Administrators, Coping Strategy, Higher Education

Introduction

Stress as a factor interacts with human productivity daily irrespective of the place one finds him/herself. Stress is found in all professions and workspaces and involves both female and male staff in higher education throughout the world (Wong, 2020). Stress in different regions of the world and industries/sectors appears to affect the work efficiency of female managers in the academic system. There has been little research on stress management on female administrators in the Kazakhstani higher educational context. Thus, this paper focuses on the sources and management mechanisms that female higher education administrators and managers employ within one Kazakhstani institution.

Stress management can be affected by various factors, one of which is gender. The gender of the school manager may influence stress management interventions or tactics because the management style of female managers tends to be different from that of male managers (Uba-Mbibi & Nwamuo, 2013). In addition, social, cultural, and biological traits and functions of higher education administrators/managers could be central to their stress-coping mechanisms. For instance, Anyanwu et al., (2015) in their studies on stress management among school principals found that the difficulty of balancing a job and family obligations may increase stress for women, but male principals may have a greater opportunity to use more time for office work than the female principals. Both male and female administrators in higher education appear to endure stress when managing the affairs of the institution, but as mentioned earlier, women are frequently affected by stress due to their responsibilities to their families (Campbell et al., 2010).

Stress is a significant issue that hinders managers and administrators in higher education all over the world from being productive. Up to this point, several fields of research, including higher education, have focused on the phenomena of stress. Researchers from Western and Non-Western nations have studied stress management considering the stress of the risk posed to the health of women. High levels of stress in higher education employees are brought on by uncertainty, which can result in exhaustion and poor coping mechanisms (Banerjee & Mehta, 2016; Bolden et al., 2009). Although stress at work is necessary for motivating and supporting higher education administration, teachers, and students, stress is disturbingly on the rise (Brock & Grady, 2002). Even though there have been many studies on the effects of stress on both students and employees, female administrators, and supervisors in higher education, there are no previous studies that focus on how stress affects female managers in Kazakhstani higher education. This study aims to fill this knowledge gap.

The research questions that frame this study are as follows:

RQ1: In Kazakhstan's higher education institutions, what are the main sources of stress for female administrators and managers?

RQ2: How do stress factors influence women who work as administrators and managers in higher education in Kazakhstan?

RQ3: What stress-adaptive coping mechanisms and tactics are employed by female administrators and managers in higher education in Kazakhstan?

Literature Review

Women who have progressed through the ranks of formal employment often hold administrative roles with institutional supervision responsibilities. Due to the expectations placed on female administrators by their jobs, female managers at all levels commonly face job stress which could be physical and psychological reactions at the workplace (Michie, 2002). Additionally, they help employees work as efficiently as possible as they continue to carry out their main responsibilities, which include taking care of the children and cleaning the house (Amu, 2005). According to Stamarski and Son Hing (2015), women have been historically underrated in the aspect of decision-making processes due to some factors such as a lack of consideration for their interests at both family and societal levels.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that women devote more time to their families and even if they get paying jobs, women still perform more household duties than men, and this raises their overall workload and imposes limitations (Noll et al., 2020). An unpleasant and detrimental physical and psychological state brought on by a person's job is known as occupational stress. Moreover, administrators may face occupational stress as a result of their efforts to meet the expectations of school management. Occupational stress can also occur when people are subjected to pressures and expectations at work that are inappropriate for their skills and knowledge (Wadesango et al., 2015). Although there are various ways that workplace stress can manifest, it is frequently believed to be made worse when employees receive little or no support from their managers and coworkers (WHO, 2017). An employee's performance at work may suffer if stress levels rise above a particular point because these issues might affect their psychological and physical health (Harmsen et al., 2018).

The literature identified two factors of stress namely individual factors and workplace factors. Individual factors include the challenges of balancing work and life creating an excessive workload. Workplace factors include environmental factors, group averseness, and physical factors. Each of these factors will be explored separately.

Individual Factors

Women who are trying to balance their work and life tend to manage both their professional and personal lives simultaneously (Chandra, 2012). Working in an environment can force female administrators to put in long hours and take care of their family members (Nwagbara & Akanji, 2012). Hence, both work-to-family improvement and family-to-work development need to be carefully considered to better understand how work and family responsibilities interact (Khairunneezam et al., 2017). According to Osipow & Davis (1988) and Winefield et al.(2002) the official tasks of women in administrative positions kept increasing in higher education institutions resulting in excessive workload, and stress among female managers has been given less attention.

Environmental factors

Physical working conditions have an impact on work performance. Poor physical conditions, such as unsatisfactory working conditions, ineffective communication, unsafe or unconducive environment, and having an aggressive harassing supervisor who is dangerous to work for and hard to please can be frustrating and can make women feel stressed and worried about the job (Champoux, 2010). According to Devonport et al. (2008), organizational stress results from the interaction of a person's personality traits, environment, demands, and coping mechanisms. Employees may operate more efficiently and even feel more satisfied when stress levels are at their optimal levels, as opposed to when they are dysfunctional or negative. Factors that may increase stress and affect the work performance of female administrators include a lack of polite employees, lack of facilities, excessive noise, overcrowding, large university population, lack of career growth for advancement, and conflicting tasks (Bhagat et al., 2010). In addition, a lack of unity within the group, and the cohesiveness of the group may affect how well people interact with each other. Group members may experience a great deal of stress as a result of conflicts and low cooperation that arise during interactions (Champoux, 2010).

Occupational stress and stress management in higher education

Different scholars across the globe have researched stress management among female higher education administrators and managers (Hussain et al., 2018). For example, Kersh's (2018) examination of women in higher education explained that workplace factors like juggling multiple responsibilities, work spilling over into personal life, leadership challenges, discrimination, marginalization, and role insufficiency (i.e., ambiguity in work roles, and a diminished sense of control) all contribute to increased workplace stress for women administrators in higher education. How stresses are viewed typically determines an individual's coping

strategies, suggesting whether they will handle a stressor effectively or ineffectively. The findings imply that female administrators are using efficient coping mechanisms while dealing with regular workplace challenges and have acquired some degree of learned resourcefulness (Kersh, 2018).

Likewise, Mathews et al. (2022) examined the causes and origins of occupational stress among female academics in South Africa. The study findings suggest female higher education workers are faced with stress when there are poor human resources, mobbing, imposition, lack of professionalism from authorities, nepotism, favoritism, retrenchments, and instability, as well as poor recognition and appreciation. All these factors negatively impacted workload and performance management. The study adds family and personal life pressures as well as teachings, research, and administration, lack of annual leave, meetings, and a lack of support, as major sources of stress as well.

Various studies from different regions and countries appeared to have laid much emphasis on the need to provide a conducive work environment for female managers and administrators with their functionality in the academic system and family environment not to be neglected at every given point in time and this was achieved by pointing out the health implications and negative influences of working in a stressful environment (Gillespie et al., 2001). This paper aims to fill the knowledge gap in research on female managers working in higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan (Larchick & Chance, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

This study will be embedded in two theoretical frameworks based on their immense contribution to the understanding of the central theme: the occupational stress model developed by Karasek (1979) and the transactional theory of stress (TTS) and the control model (CM) conceptualized by Cox et al. (2000). TTS and CM **are** relevant to the study as it helps to identify stressors, strain, and control mechanisms utilized in dealing with stress among women. The Karasek (1979) model for workplace stress served as one of the foundations for this investigation. The occupational health literature and job design both benefitted greatly from the model. According to this concept, workplace/occupational stress is a result of how demanding a person's job is and how much discretion, power, or decision-making authority the worker has over their obligations. The model states that stress happens when there is a high strain on an employee's body due to high demands on the job combined with little ability to influence activities and procedures (Bridger et al.,

2013). Employees flourish in environments with strong job demands and task control (Häusser et al., 2010).

From the literature, stress and its impacts on female higher education administrators and managers are evident thus, making stress management strategies become even more pivotal and given adequate attention. While the subject of stress is not strange to most developed and developing nations, it is yet to get relevant attention in Kazakhstan. For a higher education-driven environment like Kazakhstan where internationalization is encouraged, it is of great essence to have such important literature on stress management among female administrators and managers.

Methodology

The study was undertaken at one university in Kazakhstan. Participants in the study included senior female administrators and managers in higher education who possessed certain administrative attributes chosen for the research. These attributes were as follows: 3-5 years experience of working as senior administrators, the ability to provide in-depth details about their experiences, understanding, and relevance to the study and based on the institution, readiness, and ability to provide in-depth information on their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

According to Creswell & Poth (2016) and Kuzel (1992), semi-structured interviews require a minimum sample size of five to twenty-five participants. The researcher sampled women from the university who possessed specific characteristics and were distributed across five departments. Each recruitment email was accompanied by a consent letter with a request to participate in the study. Thus, the researcher explored a total of 10 female administrators who had 3-5 years of working experience and worked full-time in higher education institutions (Table 1). Hence, a purposeful sampling technique was adopted which is thought to be more effective, real, and widely acceptable in the university to select participants for the study because the qualitative research and the data obtained were aimed at evaluating participants' responses, perceptions, and experiences to issues of stress, the influence of stress, and coping techniques (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

Table 1
Female Administrators' Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Job Title
A	30s	Senior manager
B	40s	General manager
C	30s	Senior manager
D	30s	Senior manager
E	30s	Senior manager
F	30s	Manager
G	40s	Senior manager
H	30s	General manager
I	30s	Senior manager
J	40s	General manager

A semi-structured interview is a data collection approach that allows the researcher to gain information from key participants who have experiences, perceptions, and understanding of a related subject of study. This is relevant to the study as it also allows for follow-up questions and comments (Pratt, 2009). The instruments consisted of open-ended question items which consisted of three sections that aided in getting information from participants. Section A dealt with sources of stress, whereas Section B gathered information on the influence of stress on work output. Finally, information on female administrators' stress-coping mechanisms was also requested. The combination of these instruments was useful for obtaining in-depth experiences and allowed the researcher to interact with participants and listen alternatively to their responses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Participants' permission was sought, and the purpose and research design were discussed in detail with the participants. The interviews, which lasted for 40-60 minutes, were conducted one-on-one and in the English language. While conducting a study that focuses on humans, the researcher must take into consideration participants' confidentiality and the risk involved while conducting the study. Thus, the researcher made sure that no damage came to participants in accordance with standard ethical procedures (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 115).

The qualitative data analysis method was used in this study which aimed to evaluate the participants' responses and experiences to stress sources, the influence of stress, and coping mechanisms in order to get quality data and syntheses (Cohen et al., 2017). Creswell (2012) presented data analysis in terms of a few simple procedures. To begin with, the data collected were manually transcribed into field texts, In addition, the transcripts were carefully analyzed, and studied in order to make meaning, Furthermore, the outcomes were broken down into segments with key ideas, and each transcript was read carefully and given a code in order to enable the researcher to streamline and organize all the recorded data without losing or forgetting any of the participants' vital information and by using exact quotes from the participants.

Findings

In total, 10 female participants from a university in Kazakhstan were interviewed. Although the issues of stress in higher education, especially for women, are very sensitive, the 10 participants spoke about their experiences and thoughts. The interview analysis identified three key themes, which are as follows:

> Major sources of stress for female administrators and managers.
>
> Influences of stress on work output on female administrators in higher education.
>
> Common coping strategies employed by female administrators and managers.

Major Sources of Stress for Female Administrators and Managers

The first theme that emerged from participants about the sources of stress in higher institutions is the excessive amount of workload. This can be summarized into five elements: the number of tasks, fear of public scrutiny, student issues, environmental factors, and communication barriers.

Number of Tasks. Most of the participants shared that female administrators in Kazakhstan encounter a different kind of stress because of the highly demanding nature of the Kazakhstani higher education system alongside the fact that there are numerous higher institutions in the country. For most of the participants in this study, job stress is frequently brought about by the number of tasks such as working with student groups, paperwork, and budget management which also emanates from high expectations placed by university leadership and government. A proper understanding of the purpose of the job was essential for all participants, as failure to recognize the job role might result in heavy task responsibilities and then create a stressful environment for women in higher education. With the continuous demand of meeting with faculty, students, and even external clients, maintenance of existing standards is of priority. Participant E related having to respond to a lot of requests from both superiors and students which is demanding.

> *I have a very big amount of workload I receive from my superiors. I get complaints from students who should have received payment and I don't feel happy at that time when you are trying to do your best, but things don't go well.* (Participant E)

Fear of Public Scrutiny. Fear of public scrutiny was mentioned as another source of stress by participants. Based on the findings, the chances of female managers' performance and skills are being carefully observed by the people in government. Hence, most female managers try as much as possible to be transparent in the discharge of their duties at the workplace. One of the participants highlighted this point by sharing that public scrutiny in the workplace affects female administrators' effective performance. She added that:

Public scrutiny is not just probably scrutiny on the national scale but even on the regional scale, on the city scale and there is so much public interest in universities these days and you know, we have this natural hearing government in Kazakhstan, so everyone has social media pages, where he or she can express their views and there is so much criticism without any evidence and any database and you know these days people are growing crazy about this democracy. (Participant A)

Student Issues. Another major challenge described by participants concerning stress was the issue of responding to students' needs. It was stated that most of the factors encountered by female administrators were revealed to be issues of academic probations, mental health challenges, exams and records, anxiety, inability to provide enough learning classrooms to students, and students training in approaches of critical reasoning were reported as sources of stress. Sometimes, the stress in the university often comes from the interaction with the students. For instance, student issues have to do with marking, exams, and records of grades on the system.

Yeah, causes of stress in the university sometimes come from the interaction with the students … Yes, work itself you know it's not easy but you know I'm also growing doing my job but you know the work, you have to meet deadlines pressure from meetings and all that student issues which has to do with marking and recording of grades on the system and also as an administrator, we need to find better programs that will enhance students learning approaches and likewise the university. (Participant I).

Influences of Stress on Work-Output

Having identified two main elements that influenced the workout plan for female administrators in higher education. These include a decrease in productivity and emotional instability.

Less productivity. A decrease in productivity was one of the commonly mentioned outcomes outlined by participants. For example, participants shared their thoughts on how stress reduces job productivity, which makes female administrators and managers less productive. Participants also reported that of course, stress impacts a lot, stating that as humans, a lot of creativity and inspiration is required to get one going on the job. When participants lack the motivation to work, they tend to generate low output. Certainly, stress is negative as it affects your emotional and mental well-being which can sometimes hinder your family responsibilities.

There is no motivation to work when a stressful situation surfaces. Well, I do not feel motivated when I am in a stressful situation, it means that something went wrong. Of course, stress is negative because it affects your emotional and mental well-being. When you come home and you are stressed, you tend to chew this stressful situation which can sometimes hinder your family responsibilities. (Participant D)

Emotional instability. Most of the participants reported a central theme which was a high intensity of emotional instability regarding the workplace. Women are emotionally sensitive in the workplace and sometimes feel insecure about their work. In addition, female administrators and managers in higher education dislike working when their emotional mindsets are unstable and explaining the reasons as it influenced their outcomes. Participants relate to the subject that "Personally, as female administrators, they do not like to work in a stressful environment as job demands are becoming more prevalent in university campuses". According to participants (F, G, and I), the lack of sensitization on stress management on university campuses is also another big challenge to female higher education administrators and managers. The influence of stress on participants is said to be negative because it's on the emotional level, on the ground that stress makes female administrators nervous and emotionally unstable.

I feel that stress has a lot of negative influences on women than men because women are emotionally sensitive in the workplace and sometimes feel insecure about their work. So, I think stress leads to burnout and less productivity. (Participant I)

In most cases, it becomes difficult to separate work life from family life. Whenever a stressful situation happens at work, emotions are not stable and sometimes the family becomes a target of negative reactions. Consequently, the negative effects create emotional instability and social distractions among women in higher education. Thus, based on the findings of the study it is possible to imply that workplace environment and other factors have an impact on the stress experienced by female administrators which in turn affects their work-life balance.

Common Coping Strategies Employed by Female Administrators and Managers

The findings revealed that female managers generally

have several positive techniques that contribute to helping them remain on the job and reduce institutional stress. These include friendly communication and leisure and relaxation.

Friendly Communication. Participants in the study consistently emphasized the helpful role that communication and sharing of challenges play in their lives. Participants reported instances in which colleagues engaged them in healthy communication when they encountered stress at the workplace. Female higher education administrators experience less stress when they can discuss their issues and connect with other female leaders at other higher education institutions. Following participants responses, discussing any issues with female leaders is beneficial since it helps others grasp the subject at hand and highlights its particularity. As a female manager, you need to understand that people have diverse problems that confront them either at the workplace or family. Thus, talking, sharing, and encouraging one another shows they are not left out and this helps to reduce stress.

> *I think as the manager, for me one of the working strategies is talking to my peers… talking to other female leaders in higher education in Kazakhstan. Sharing our difficulties, as in challenges, helps a lot. We understand that our problems are different, and we understand that some of the challenges are unique for females. Talking, sharing, and empowering each other shows you are not alone and all these help me to reduce stress.* (Participant A).

Leisure and Relaxation. Participants stated that taking time off with proper relaxation plans helps to reduce the stress that comes with the job demands of a female administrator. Most of the participants expressed how relaxation helps them to overcome a highly demanding job environment. Having just resting time, meditating, physical exercise, reflecting, and trying to accept positive things helps reduce stress.

> *Having just resting time, meditating, reflecting, and trying to accept positive things, I do my hobbies like making some craft work because I love it, Just talking with my family and taking a walk is successful for me because sometimes when I want to go home, I take a bus half of the way and then the other half I walk my way to the house getting this fresh air and physical exercise is helpful and getting this fresh air and physical exercise is helpful, I relax with my family watch YouTube and Netflix.* (Participant E)

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate how female managers and administrators in Kazakhstan's higher education system manage stress, the sources of stress that affect women, and the effect of working in a stressful environment. The qualitative results of the study disclosed various sources of stressors that female administrators and managers face while discharging their duties at the workplace. In the current study, participants identified attending meetings, documentation for meetings, excessive tasks, and deadlines. In addition, from the analysis of the findings, it becomes clear that many female administrators are greatly affected by stress due to the increased number of responsibilities because of additional family duties. Thus, on the influence of job-related stress, the study participants help to infer different degrees of impact of working in a stressful environment can be detrimental to female administrators in higher education. Mudor (2011) mentioned that if employee stress levels are not regularly managed, it often results in low productivity, which can cause poor job quality, emotional instability, a high rate of mistakes, unsatisfactory work, and client complaints. Although some tasks require a certain amount of pressure, if this is exceeded, it can have a highly negative effect on employees.

The study participants raised alarm about being emotionally drained whenever faced with stress and ordinarily, an emotionally drained person can barely think right and is less efficient. This is in line with Willis et al. (2009) findings, who similarly proposed that stress on managers may cause bad behaviour and thoughts, emotional problems, and physical health issues, all of which may impair efficient school management. Furthermore, according to Larchick and Chance (2002), principals' health, well-being, and performance are significantly impacted by the stress of their jobs.

All the interviewed participants acknowledged that coping techniques were an important factor that helped them deal with stress. Not only did the female administrators provide their ways of managing stress, but also recognized the need for every female administrator to use those coping mechanisms when faced with difficulties at the workplace. The result here agreed with previous works by Burke et al. (1996) and Burke & Greenglass (1993), where it was emphasized that stress-coping strategies vary for female higher education managers and administrators. In all the strategies identified by the study participant communication is central.

Several results indicate that one element that smoothed the journey of female administrators in a higher institution were having quality communication with colleagues. Most of the participants mentioned friendly communication, relaxation, exercise, and social support were revealed to have a significant impact on them. This is in line with Frese (1985), who identified that stress management techniques have been

known to reduce stress-related symptoms.

In contrast, Donham & Thelin (2016) showed that communication is most difficult when one is stressed. The study showed that the body's response to stress physically affects the capacity to communicate thoughts and feelings in a clear message and to listen attentively. Conversations with loved ones, close friends, and colleagues could become avoided or withheld by an individual in difficult circumstances. Conversely, openly talking and expressing worries, fears, and disappointments, however, can be beneficial and healthy to relationships (Donham & Thelin, 2016).

The result of this research shows that the study fits with both the occupational stress model developed by Karasek (1979) and the transactional theory of stress (TTS) and the control model (CM) conceptualized by Cox et al. (2000). These theories established the identification process of sources of workplace stress, strain, and control mechanisms utilized in dealing with stress among women. This supports the transactional theory of stress (TTS) and control model (CM) by Cox et al. (2000) who suggest that stress is a result of the interaction of an individual with a particular motive or belief in a highly demanding work environment, and not the product of the environment nor the individual itself.

Conclusion

The above-presented discussion section explained the findings in connection with different works of literature. The study utilized the transactional theory of stress (TTS) and the control model (CM) developed by Karasek (1979). The theory was pivotal as it aided in the identification of diverse stressors, strains, and control techniques applied by the participants in reducing stress and the stimulus-response between each individual and their environment. The theories also focused

on how participants have different ways of managing pressure at the workplace which depends on their perceptions. From the findings, it was stated that a large number of responsibilities was the key factor that affected most female administrators working in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. Similarly, the findings revealed that stress had a notable significance on the professional lives of female administrators in Kazakhstani higher education. The negative influence of stress included low efficiency and creativity, burnout, and less productivity.

Workplace stress is an increasing issue for workers, particularly among female managers. The findings of the interviews with participants established positive outcomes to cope with stress such as quality communication, recreational activities, proper relaxation, and physical exercise were shared to be the best means of stress management. While carrying out the research the study encountered quite a few challenges. One of the study's limitations was that the research selected and focused on 10 female administrators who work in one higher education institution and the study is limited to a single case, which means the amount of their experience and perceptions on stress topic cannot represent the general opinions of all female administrators in Kazakhstan. Notwithstanding the limitations, the study provides a vital understanding of female administrators' and managers' experiences as it examined various sources of stress from different participants, and acknowledged diverse coping mechanisms that could assist in reducing the effect of stress on university female managers. The study may help universities reduce the number of tasks assigned to female managers by recruiting more staff and supporting female administrators in organizing quarterly training to manage stress.

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