

## **GENDERED PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES FACING FEMALES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP POSITIONS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Since the coming into force of the 1992 Republican Constitution of Ghana, women are being encouraged and empowered to take up leadership position and to take active part in decision making process like their male counterparts. However, women leaders are faced with many challenges in the performance of their responsibilities. This study, therefore, sought to find out female leaders' gendered perceptions and challenges facing them in educational leadership positions in the Sunyani West District of Ghana. Qualitative research approach was adopted with the case study design. The study was guided by these questions: (1) How do females in educational leadership positions perceive leaders?, and (2) What are the challenges facing women in school leadership positions? The study is delimited to perception of women in leadership and their challenges in educational setting in the Sunyani West District. Twenty participants comprising heads of senior high schools, departmental heads, senior housemistresses and female circuit supervisors were purposively sampled for the study. Interview and observation were employed for the data collection. Triangulation was employed to test the consistency of findings obtained through the different instruments used. The data was analysed through thematic approach. The findings of the study revealed that family factors and traditional male / female power relations constitute serious challenges to female educational leaders. Women in educational leadership positions are facing challenges due to roles conflict resulting from roles they play as mothers, wives, daughters and managers. Cultural beliefs and traditional perceptions on gender roles continue to serve as a barrier to women leaders. These challenges constitute social constraints that overshadow their leadership qualities. Negative self-judgement and its associated stereotypic conceptions of females in leadership dampen their competencies and make them feel inadequate. It has therefore become evident that, there should be an urgent need by the government and civil societies to discourage the unfair, unjust and unequal treatment sometimes meted out on women when opportunity is given to them to lead institutions. Women leaders should be encouraged by society to face and surmount these challenging realities in order to take their rightful place in leadership arena.*

**KEYWORDS:** Educational Leadership, Female Leaders, Gendered Perceptions, Leadership Positions, Educational Institutions.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Gender contestations have long been a critical part of leadership discussions, especially in terms of the limitations placed on women based on their biology and social role stratifications (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009). During the period of colonization in Africa, more emphasis

was placed on educating the male child than the female. Consequently, most females were not educated. Education is a normal requirement to obtain formal sector job. Examples of female jobs included housekeeping, petty trading and farming. These are low status and low income jobs.

In recent times, the situation has improved. Women have access to education which has broadened the scope and horizons and given them many job options and opportunities. This has been occasioned by an understanding of the nature of power relation between the sexes and its implications for society as a whole. It is common today, to find women in different professions and at different levels competing with their male counterparts. For example, some women are engineers, doctors while others occupy leadership positions in their workplaces. This was not the case many years ago. Throughout history there have been embedded beliefs that characterise leadership as a traditionally masculine activity (Gedney, 1999).

However, the rises in feminist ideologies seem to weaken such strongholds. Paternalistic ideologies on gender roles particularly among traditionalist and conservative communities such as in Ghana have produced prejudice toward female leaders. Women are considered as having less leadership abilities than men and their leadership is thus perceived less favourably (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Though evidence suggests that the proportion of women in management is increasing in most parts of the world, doubts about women's leadership skills still exist and some organisations still define and perceive leadership in masculine terms (Schein & Mueller, 1992). Leadership has been considered and accepted as a masculine domain (Friesen, 1983). For over three centuries females have more often than not been prevented from seeking and assuming positions of leadership and public authority (Dopp & Sloan, 1986).

Consequently, women seem to face many challenges in their effort to access and provide for successful leadership. This study therefore sought to explore existing perceptions on female leaders in education in the Sunyani West District schools with a view to establish embedded conceptions on women leadership.

Until the early twentieth century, sex role stereotypes, occupational stereotypes and discrimination have defined involvement in leadership roles (Dopp & Sloan, 1986). The apparent limited involvement of females in areas of leadership and more specifically in the administrative function of educational sector reflects and perpetuates these societal assumptions. Some females have been apparently reluctant to peruse and contest for educational administrative positions because of societal attitudes toward females in leadership position. Some schools of thought tried to justify the under-representation of females in educational leadership, thus: females do not have what it takes to assume leadership positions; females lack support of their subordinates and community; females do not want the job; and females have no training and experience.

In terms of training, experience and age of entry into leadership positions, and career interruptions, major differences still persist between men and women. Religious groups such as Christianity and Islam who believe in patriarchal theology that make female subordinate and submissive to men is a challenge to women progression. The patriarchal policies ensure that the man is the "natural" head of the household and that their decision making role naturally extends to public domain. They therefore occupy most of the leadership positions in institutions in all walks of life (Mourad, 1998). Although men generally dominated traditional African

societies, some females were able to play roles traditionally reserved for men. Examples of such females are Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana, Indira Ghandi of India, Clinton of U.S.A, Golda Meir of Israel, Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Bhutto of Pakistan. In Ghana no laws ban females from participating actively in various sectors of the economy and in social life. Both females and males have equal rights, there is equal pay for equal jobs, equal opportunities, education, experience or qualification but cultural perception about females as inferior or weak compared to male hinders their overall participation.

In most ethnic groups in Ghana, females are not considered equal to males but are considered to be a help mate to men. Polygamy, child marriage, widow inheritance all go to strengthen the inferior status of females. Some Ghanaian cultural beliefs clearly favour the man. The man is considered the head of the family. An Akan proverb emphasizes this and states that “when a woman manages to carve the drum, it is kept in the man’s room” meaning credit or honour is given to the man for what the woman does because it is assumed that the woman could not do it without the help of a man. Sometimes a high commendation given to a woman who excels is a way of saying we did not expect you to be capable of doing so much. This research seeks to find out the challenges facing women in educational leadership positions in Sunyani West District in the Brong-Ahafo Region.

The problem here is that discrimination against women has been a long-standing issue that most societies continue to grapple with. Since the beginning of civilization, women have suffered discrimination, degradation, oppression and all forms of inhuman treatment on account of their cultural beliefs and practices. From birth, people start limiting the possibilities, will, intentions, ability, potentials regardless of what qualities a woman display (Abiola, 2004). Women are recognized with domestic responsibilities such as household duties and caring for home (Majanja & Kiplang’at, 2003).

There are numerous discussions going on within the country concerning gender inequality and disparity in almost all sectors of the economy. It is an undeniable fact that there is under-representation of females in various spheres especially in leadership positions. Despite the promulgation of gender policies, the status of women, including the different professions, has been an issue of serious concern (Falaiye, 2004). The 1992 Constitution of Ghana and former labour law of Ghana (section 34 and 36 labour regulation, 1969, L 1.632), upholds equal position and opportunities for men and women. Despite many initiatives over the years, the situation of women remains significantly unchanged. In view of this, the researchers want to find out the challenges facing women in leadership positions in the Sunyani West District of the Brong-Ahafo Region.

The following research questions guided the study (1) How do females in educational leadership positions perceive leaders?, and (2) What are the challenges facing women in school leadership positions? The study is delimited to perception of women in leadership and their challenges in educational setting in the Sunyani West District.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Relatable literature was reviewed on gendered perspectives and challenges in leadership. Sexily and Starke (1995, p.39) defined leadership as “the ability to influence others to pursue the goals the leader thinks is important and desirable”. Leadership also involves many specific

activities such as creating a vision which motivates followers to action. A paper by the Ministry of Education (MoE) forward the most comprehensive definition of leadership as the art or process of influencing people so that they will strive willingly and enthusiastically towards the achievement of group goals (MoE, 2004, p. 2). Influence is the key concept in the definition, and that the source of influence may be the position a person has in a formal organizational structure or recognition and respect given to a person due to his/her professional or social acceptance in a group. Leadership in education has long been seen as a key factor in school effectiveness.

The examination of gender's impact on leadership style is another area that has been widely researched. Ngaaso and Attom (2011) view gender to be the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men, or girls and boys. This comprises of the relations between men and women, girls and boys." Much of this research was conducted on the more common distinction between task-oriented styles (or initiation of structure) and interpersonally-oriented styles (also labelled consideration), and the dimensions of democratic versus autocratic (similar to the dimensions of participative and directive). Previously, Eagly and Johnson (1990) cited in Gibson (1995) conducted a meta-analysis of gender and leadership style that examined studies comparing men and women on task and interpersonal styles as well as democratic and autocratic styles. Evidence was found for both the presence and absence of differences between men and women. While the authors concluded that the overall search for sex differences in leader style was not demonstrated, significant gender differences were reported in the use of democratic or participatory styles of leadership. Their research revealed that women leaders are less directive than men.

In leadership research, gender has been distinguished from sex, especially in feminism (Connell, 2009). According to Marshall (1995, p.484), "the feminists" paradigm grew from the dominant male and structural-functionalist perspective. Marshall (1995) contends that "women who are educational administrators are more attuned to teaching, curriculum and instruction, and children, perhaps because they spend more time as mothers before they become teachers" (p.488). According to Marshall (1995) when women talk, supervise or lead in ways that are not consistent with the dominant paradigm of leadership, their work is not credited as leadership. The researcher is of the opinion that androcentric philosophy has prejudiced and disadvantaged women who endeavoured to attain leadership positions in organizations such as schools. According to Blackmore (1989), feminists' reconstruction of leadership would involve women in meaningful discourse of organizational life and values as autonomous individuals rather than as objects of patriarchal discourse, with the focus on relationships between individuals and leadership. The researcher is of the opinion that at least the view should be empowering others rather than power over others.

According to Gossetti and Rusch (1995), the power of feminists' paradigm is that it focuses on the gaps and blank spaces of dominant cultures, knowledge bases and behaviours. Using those spaces, feminism can focus on women and their experiences, so that feminist theory can become part of contemporary dialogue and experiences, rather than just an add-on to the dominant culture. In the researcher's opinion, many women leaders see discrepancies between the dominant culture and their own experiences as women leaders. They do not necessarily propose the eradication of current knowledge bases, but to challenge current theories, knowledge and assumptions about leadership, replacing them with dialogue and ideas that are

more inclusive, open and democratic. Considering leadership from the foregoing perspectives provides a realistic picture of the various views held by individuals working within schools. What is imperative is that women in leadership provide a different view and interpretation of leadership.

Male gender qualities are often characterised as aggressive, independent, objective, logical, rational, analytical, decisive, confident, assertive, ambitious, opportunistic and impersonal. These are distinguished from female gender qualities described as emotional, sensitive, expressive, cooperative, intuitive, warm, tactful, receptive to ideas, talkative, gentle, tactful, empathetic and submissive (Park, 1996). The notion of male and female gender qualities facilitates the argument that male gender qualities are oriented towards more impersonal, task-oriented or transactional approach to leadership, while female gender qualities tends towards more nurturing, relationship-oriented style of leadership that underlies the transformational leadership approach.

The assertion that gender influences leadership approaches is by no means a unanimous one. Rosener's (1990) survey of male and female executive with similar age, jobs and education, found that women tended to be more transformational in their leadership style than men. Using their version of transformational leadership model, Kouzes and Posner (1990), found that female leaders were more likely than male leaders to practice 'modeling the way' and 'encouraging the heart' thus identifying women as more likely to be sensitive to subordinates' needs. A cross-cultural study by Gibson (1995) involving Norway, Sweden, Australia and the USA, found that male leaders were more likely to emphasize goal-setting than female leaders while female leaders were more likely to focus on facilitating interaction than male leaders. These trends and character traits among women leaders were also noted in the Malaysian public sector leadership survey (Salim, 2007).

As defined by the International Labour Organization Bureau of Gender-equality (2000) gender refer to the social differences and relation between men and women which are learned, changeable overtime, and have wide variations both within and between cultures. The differences and relationship are socially constructed and learned through the socialization process and are context specific and can be modified (Williams & Sheehan, 2001). This makes it an issue in developing gender-mainstreaming. Depending on this definition, the researchers tried to explore the role that gender plays in educational leadership discourse. As Blackmore (1989:93) states:

Leadership is a concept central to theories of how organizations such as schools and educational institutions work since, historically, schools have been organized in hierarchical ways. Authority is seen to be legitimately accorded to the principal, generally a male. Increasingly, the ways in which schooling and school knowledge are defined and organized have been contested.

Historically, there has been gender dynamics of organizations. It is believed that formation of masculinity and femininity in the eighteenth century promoted the ideology of separate spheres for women and men based on the bourgeois model of the family. This became institutionalized in modern organizations. Thus, the public sphere was for the male and the private or domestic was for the female (Blackmore, 1993).

On the other hand, there are those who have argued that leadership is not necessarily influenced by gender but by personality traits (Ronk, 1993). Male and female leaders in organisations tended to exhibit similar amounts of task-oriented and people-oriented leadership behaviours (Powell, 1990). Kolb (1999) asserted that two decades of research indicated few, if any leadership differences in the leadership behaviours of male and female leaders noting that leadership styles have to do with how a person relates to people, tasks and challenges. A person's style is usually a very personal and distinctive feature of his or her personality and character. A style may be democratic, centralized, decentralized, emphatic, detached, extroverted, introverted, assertive, passive, engaged or remote. These different styles may work well in different situations and there is often a proper fit between the needs of an organization and the appropriate leadership style.

Nevertheless, Blackmore (1993) noted that women's entrance in to the public sphere in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly at the top as leaders completely threatened this simple dichotomization of life into the public and private or male and female spheres. She argued that the values, ideologies and structures associated with dominant theories of administration and association with cultural practice, famous certain image of masculinity at any one time. Women moving in to the public sphere treated many of the basic conceptions of the rational bureaucratic world. Thus, steps were taken by top male leaders and male dominated school boards to make ascertain that female leaders were concentrated in the lower administrative echelons and that the male old-boy's network was promoted (Blackmore, 1993).

Women in educational leadership are highly challenged. Leadership has generally been associated with men and male traits of behaviour. Mostly, past theories of educational leadership have been dominated by one gender, the male and have taken the instance of the male as the norm. Public expression and writings has been a chronicle of man's experiences where their viewpoints predominate and their needs are expressed (Marshall, 1984). In constructing a feminist critique of leadership in education, Blackmore (1989) has undertaken a critical analysis of the way women have been displaced from or submerged in both organizational and political theory, and how much of this visibility has permeated the everyday common sense notions of leadership.

The glass ceiling metaphor has been used to explain gender inequities faced by women in institutional contexts while Eagly and Carli (2007) explains that it can also be viewed as a metaphor for the levels of leadership to which women have not been permitted. The glass ceiling metaphor emphasizes the notion that invisible and unseen structural patterns of gender discrimination prevent women from ascending into the most prestigious, well-paying senior leadership positions (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). Data demonstrating women's slower ascension into top-tier leadership positions, lower earnings, fewer academically based awards, and lesser representation in top-tier leadership positions are all examples of how the glass ceiling functions and limits women's potential. Glass ceilings and walls are systematically constructed as a consequence of cultural beliefs, behaviours, and practices (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007).

As noted earlier, the glass ceiling is viewed as a barrier to women participation in leadership. Proponents of the glass ceiling notion argue that gender stereotypes attributed to men and women remain and are consistent across many cultures (Rudman & Phelan, 2010). Other researchers have found that women may also experience what is referred to as a "psychological

glass ceiling” (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). Shaped by gender-based socialization, the term psychological glass ceiling refers to the way in which women themselves have internalized a patriarchal gender ideology which, when acted out, undermines their own chances at securing leadership positions.

Some argue that women’s participation in, and their access to senior leadership positions is defined by cultural and belief systems in a society (Shah & Shah, 2012). They argued that, in spite of an increasing association of teaching role with women globally, their presence is conspicuously low in senior educational leadership positions across countries and cultures (Shah, 2008; Coleman, 2009). There are some broadly shared factors such as gender power relations, role stereotyping, role socialization, public/domestic divide and others leading to this phenomenon (Shah, 2008).

The explanation exists that the factors that work against women are not similarly constructed and enacted across cultures and societies (Shah & Shah, 2012). There are situational contexts that have consequences for how women participation in leadership. Shah and Shah explained further that situated cultural and belief systems, and social patterns of behaviour determine the discourses shaping the concepts and practices in each context.

These, however, there is a side to women’s participation in educational leadership and that has been the claim that feminine style of leadership is often motivational than the masculine style of leadership which tends to emphasize individualism, duty and rules (Shakeshaft, 1998). On this note, this research sought out to probe into the gendered perceptions of female leaders and the encountered challenges they face in educational leadership positions. These issues were explored in this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The issues concerning females in leadership are so diverse that a study would require due diligence and in-depth analysis which calls for the use of case study. This study adopted qualitative case study research design. Kumeckpor (1999) explains the rationale behind the use of case study method as to know, understand and be conversant with the circumstances in order to explain, advice, decide on, defend or reject a given situation, condition and argument among others. Case study focuses on understanding a particular case in its complexity. Therefore, case study method under qualitative paradigm was used to understand and be conversant with complexities of female leaders’ challenges and the coping strategies they employ.

The target population for this study comprised females who were heads occupying various leadership positions in educational institutions in the Sunyani West District. The accessible population was made up of females who were District Directors, Deputy Directors, Circuit Supervisors, Heads of Senior High Schools, Heads of Departments of Senior High Schools, Senior House mistresses and House mistresses. In all, twenty (20) female leaders comprising two (2) Headmistresses, three (3) Assistant Headmistresses, three (3) Housemistresses, four (4) Senior Housemistresses, two (2) Heads of Departments and six (6) Administrative Heads.

The purposive sampling technique was used to select (20) female leaders in educational leadership for the study. According to Kwabia (2006) purposive sampling is a sampling procedure where the researcher is only interested in a sub-group that is typical of the whole

population. Since these traits are extremely critical to the results of the investigation, the subjects who contain the characteristics were selected. Women leaders in supervisory positions in the formal education sector were purposively selected for the study. Case studies also require specific criteria for the selection of the case (Silverman, 1992). This study focused on female in educational leadership positions in the Sunyani West District. For instance, the choice of respondents was based on the following criteria of inclusion: (1) The female leaders had to be occupying an educational leadership position; (2) The female should have occupied that position for two years; and (3) The leader should be willing to participate in the study.

Interviews were used for data collection. Qualitative methods using in-depth interviews (Denzin & Yvonna, 1998) help to collect “naturally occurring” data (Silverman, 1992). The method helped to explore participants’ views in more depth manner (Invankova, Invankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006) by keeping open mind about the groups and cultures being studied to do in-depth analysis (Silverman, 1992).

Thematic approach to data analysis was employed. Themes and patterns were developed from the data collected based on the research questions backing the study. The analysis involved processes of listening, reading and re-reading, inductive reasoning, reflecting and coding the interview transcripts and drawing out major themes and patterns of views from the data collected. Major themes were identified going through the data. Excerpts from participants were used to support the themes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Qualitative data were collected through interviews and observations. The interview sessions centred on how women in education leadership positions perceived leadership, and challenges facing women in educational leadership. Thematically, direct quotes of interviewees were used to emphasize the issues, which emerged from the data. Pseudonyms were used in presenting the findings under the two main themes: perception of leadership; and challenges facing women in educational leadership. Therefore, the names should not be read as the names of the real life participants who were involved in the research. Background information of participants gathered based on the following demographic indicators such as age; marital status; qualification; number of years in the teaching service; and positions held by participants did not have influence on the outcome of the research.

The first section presents the results and discussion on the perceptions of females in educational leadership positions. The participants were asked to give their understanding of the concept of leadership. The following were some answers given by females in educational leadership positions.

Amina: *Educational leadership involves managing affairs of educational institution...A leader is someone who manages education effectively...Leadership is an opportunity that staffs get to manage affairs of the school* [Interview with Headmistress, June 6, 2017].

Esi: *Being a leader, much is expected from you...A leader is one who has vision, motivates and also train people to take positions...A leader is someone who is democratic and also have good human relationship* [Interview with Senior Housemistress, June 6, 2017].



A cursory look at the responses suggests that they present traditional understandings of leadership. The argument would be that these women do not have any different understanding of leadership that is unique from those of men. Thus they would perform leadership roles in the same ways as men. However, there are pointers that their understanding of leadership is somewhat gendered. For example, the argument of Amina that leadership is “an opportunity ... to manage affairs of the school” alludes to some gendered connotations (Ngaaso & Attom, 2011). In one breadth, it speaks to how difficult it is for women to attain leadership positions. In another, it speaks to how women see leadership as an opportunity to make a case in a space that is usually male dominated. Similarly, the comments by Esi also reveal some gender undertones. Her view that a leader is someone who is democratic and has good human relationship speaks of the leadership styles that are adopted by female educational leaders. The suggestion is that Esi did not follow traditional understandings of leadership in ways that provide for the discussion of leadership styles and traits such as autocratic leadership.

The results implies that the participants did not understand leadership in terms of being bossy but as opportunity to build relationships that are fundamental to achieving the goals of the organisation or institution or group. These conceptions do not affirm traditional understandings of leadership as a process of directing others (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009). The views negative some chauvinist views that females are problematic leaders while presenting other views that females hold a more feminine, motherly view of leadership as delineated by Sexily and Starke (1995). However, it also presents an outstanding view amongst respondents because they see educational leadership as a concept which talks about dialogue as well as exchange of ideas between a leader and a follower. These ideas are overtly visible in other comments presented in the following responses from other women in educational leadership that participated in the research.

*Adwoa: Leadership is the act of guiding and directing the affairs of schools...It all about helping to inculcate good behaviour in students...It is also about keeping the school environment clean and helping build healthy students, e.g., making sure dormitories of students are kept neat [Interview with Administrative Head, June 27, 2017].*

*Dorita: Leadership is about meeting work targets...It is quiet demanding and challenging...A leader is one who works and achieve her stated objectives...It is a duty call [Interview with Senior Housemistress, July 4, 2017].*

From the responses above, we could infer that the participants have some interesting understandings of leadership. One very interesting understanding is presented by Adwoa who explained leadership in terms of functions such as keeping the environment clean. Whereas cleanliness is an important issue, it is very difficult to fathom that it is presented as a definition of leadership. Additional to that is a very important connection between leadership and organisational goals as the participant argued that leadership is about building healthy students. That point of view coincides with the ideas that educational leadership enhances students' outcomes. Thus, women educational leaders consider leadership in a holistic manner that goes beyond management and administrative effectiveness to students' improvement (Liyod, 2009).

This connection between leadership and the achievement of group goals is present in some of the literature in Ghana and elsewhere (MoE, 2004). Overall, however, it looked like all

participants were connecting leadership with the performance of certain duties than merely being the head of an institution or a system. As one participant, Dorita, puts it more succinctly: leadership is a duty call. This would suggest that the participants have good and grounded understandings of the concept of leadership. Their conceptions are not necessarily situated in traditional understandings of leadership where the leader wielded much authority and power (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009). They demonstrated through their definitions that they have innovative and creative understandings of leadership. Their kind of leadership is about inclusivity, generative practices and achievement of objectives that improve the conditions of people within their institutions as a key factor in school effectiveness and improvement (Harris, 2008). Their conceptions of leadership indicated their willingness to be more proactive, democratic and participatory leaders. Within this context, the next section examines the participants' views on challenges facing them in leadership.

The second section examines the interview data on responses related to the challenges facing women in educational leadership. Several comments were made by the participants during the interviews. Some typical comments included the following:

*Adwoa: Combining family issues with office work is not easy...Some male teachers also disrespect me because I am a woman...I once tried to reprimand one of my male subordinates for non-performance of his duties which generated heated arguments and insults because the person least expected that from me [Interview with Administrative Head, June 27, 2017].*

*Beauty: There is lack of respect from male subordinates...partly because of our culture, that is, men should always be the leader...combining family responsibilities with my work has also not been easy for me... [Interview with Headmistress, June 28, 2017].*

These comments speak to the impact of socio-cultural factors on women leadership as delineated within the literature (Rudman & Phelan, 2010; Shah & Shah, 2012). The proposition that may be drawn from the comments is that family factors and traditional male female power relations constitute serious challenges to females in educational leadership. Factors such as combining family responsibilities with leadership duties and disrespect from male colleagues were fundamental aspects of the challenges faced by females in educational leadership positions (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). The existence of these conventional challenges is further sedimented in other comments. One such comment was from Mansa.

*Mansa: In Ghana, we see leadership as the duty for men and therefore frown upon when a female takes the position as a leader...the male subordinates try to pull you down because they see you as a woman whose place is at the kitchen and therefore should not be lord over them...Names are given to such women and therefore brings their spirit down...marriage barrier is also one of the challenges we as women in leadership face [Interview with Head of Department, June 11, 2017].*

The comment highlights that social constraints exist to the extent that it overshadow the leadership qualities of females in educational leadership. It speaks of how females in educational leadership were concerned that femaleness reinforces traditional stereotypes which assign incompetence to women (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Much of the problem resides in how male staff undermines the leadership of females in educational leadership in terms of the

fact that they were not judged by their capabilities. Females in educational leadership do not enjoy the support of male colleagues. Males find it difficult to accept the leadership of female colleagues due to cultural orientations that position females as subservient to males. Additional to these, females in educational leadership were assigned demeaning names that were intended to undermine their leadership qualities. The main effect of these stereotypic conceptions of females in educational leadership is how it dampens the leadership competencies and makes them feel inadequate. Thus the findings depart from traditional propositions of how administrative hierarchy within the bureaucratic structure of educational organizations is considered a restriction to women in educational administration (Restine, 2000; Shakeshaft, 2004). However, it epitomizes how females may always have to prove themselves because of what is described as perception related factors. They may have to always try to prove a point that they were able to lead by doing more than ordinary. These have the potential to further affect their leadership. One female in educational leadership made this point more succinctly as follows:

*Manu: My position conflicts with social responsibilities. I find it difficult in attending social programmes such as funerals, wedding, etc....although I have good relationship with my subordinates, there are some who think I am autocratic...they call me names behind my back and this affects my personal life...for example, it is difficult to get husbands because society see you as hard and difficult to deal with. [Interview with Headmistress, June 12, 2017].*

Aside from these conventional and traditional challenges were an unconventional challenges of negative parental reaction to disciplinary actions taken against students. This was illustrated in a comment by a participant as follows:

*Annie: I am very much respected in the school but sometimes, I encounter negative reactions from my subordinates on certain decisions I take. A student continuously misbehaved so upon several warnings, there was the need to deboardinise the student but some of my subordinates did not agree. Furthermore, we clash a lot of times when your action is perceived to be harsh, both from colleagues and parents [Interview with Headmistress, June 27, 2017].*

The responses given by respondents on this item can be categorized into three main strands of challenges. This calls for reducing negative perceptions towards a woman leader (Heilman, 2001). That is, personal challenges, societal challenges and administrative challenges. With the issue of personal challenges, most respondents bemoaned that their position was interfering with their private lives. They find it difficult to perform their domestic duties as a result of their leadership status. For instance, other participants including Adwoa and Beauty also admitted that their family duties interfere with their leadership roles and it is something they are not happy about. As Manu indicated in her comments, some respondents were of the view that their leadership roles were not making it possible for them to attend social gatherings and events for people close to them. This affects social relations of women in educational leadership.

Also, the responses showed that the women in leadership experience societal challenges. Societies in which women in leadership live also affect their performance of leadership roles.

Participants complained about problems they encounter from people in the school as a community on its own, and the larger society as well. This challenge begins from subordinate staff especially, male subordinates, who do not give female leaders the necessary support and reverence, because they do not see these female leaders as worthy of occupying such positions. This further epitomizes and confirms the impacts of traditional male-female stereotypes (Heilman, 2001) on the leadership of women in educational leadership positions. For example, Adwoa said male subordinates disregard her and fail to give her the necessary support she deserves as a leader.

Participants also talked about how the public negatively perceives them. For example, Manu who is a headmistress narrated how this attitude by the public affected her personal life. She said, “...it is difficult to get husbands because society sees you as big or superior over men.” This again presents socio-cultural perceptions and how they are employed to disempower females in educational leadership (Wamahiu, 2005). Beauty, a headmistress, bemoaned how they are given names by society and subordinates as they try to perform their duties. However, she converted this to strength in stating that:

*...giving a nickname to an individual is not always bad as some names can actually help to tell society the good works one has been doing.* [Interview with Headmistress, June 28, 2017].

The character presented in the comment is one that truncates the impacts of a challenge and re-organises it into a motivational recipe intended to inspire than discourage. This is not immediately visible in the literature concerning how society discriminates against women in all aspects of social life (Salim, 2007). It is therefore, worth noting for the education of women in educational leadership positions. The issue of administrative challenge is also one of the issues raised by respondents. Some respondents admitted to facing issues with administration. While some complained about the lack of infrastructure, others observed problem with decision making. This means materials and incentives that are supposed to be in place to help women in leadership are not adequate. Women in leadership observed that, some subordinates do not understand certain decisions they take and therefore tend to misinterpret their actions. For instance, Adwoa talked about how she once one tried to reprimand one of her male subordinates and the backlash she received from him. Similar challenges were related by Juliet, a head of department, who explained that:

Juliet: *The men in my department are many. But that is not the problem... The actual problem is that sometimes they make you feel as if the decisions you made are wrong because you are female. Sometimes they pass comments like ‘as for you women you can make some strange decisions’. Some will say ‘women make decisions as if they are made to make some types of decisions’* [Interview with Head of Department, June 16, 2017].

The comments that there are gender stereotypic comments that are made in reference to decisions made by women. The problem is that such comments present the claim that decisions of women leaders are not valid or not in the interest of followers. Sometimes there is resistant to implementing decisions of female educational leaders. This point was made by Erica, who is a headmistress. She explained that “*We clash a lot of times when your action is perceived to be harsh, both colleagues and parents may have problems with you.*” She continued. This also meant that apart from subordinate staff that challenges decisions taken by women in

educational leadership, other stakeholders like parents are also able to object to or influence decisions taken by women leaders. This shows how organisational and social dynamics combine to pose challenges to women in educational leadership as argued within the literature (Brown & Ralph, 1996). From this background the next section explored the effects of these challenges on women in educational leadership.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The understandings of educational leadership positions did not follow traditional understandings of leadership in ways that provide for the discussion of leadership styles and traits such as autocratic leadership. Women understanding of leadership is somewhat gendered. They viewed leadership as an opportunity to make an impact in a space that is usually male dominated and difficult for women to inhabit. These perceptions of leadership were defined by the everyday experiences of female educational leaders. They did not understand leadership in terms of being bossy but as opportunity to build relationships that are fundamental to achieving the goals of the organisation or institution or group. These views negate some chauvinist views that females are problematic leaders, while presenting other views that females hold a more feminine, motherly view of leadership. Their understanding of leadership connects leadership with organisational goals; and the performance of certain duties than merely being the head of an institution or a system.

The women demonstrated through their definitions that they have innovative and creative understandings of leadership. Their kind of leadership is about inclusivity, generative practices and achievement of objectives that improve the conditions of people within their institutions. Their conceptions of leadership indicated their willingness to be more proactive, democratic and participatory leaders.

Challenges facing women in educational leadership speaks of the impacts of socio-cultural factors on women leadership. Family factors and traditional male female power relations constitute serious challenges to females in educational leadership. The challenges range from undermining by male colleagues to overload due to the combination of household and family responsibilities and their professional educational leadership roles. Females in educational leadership do not enjoy the support of male colleagues because they find it difficult to accept the leadership of female colleagues due to traditional cultural orientations that position females as subservient to males. Additional to these, females in educational leadership were assigned demeaning names that were intended to undermine their leadership qualities. Societies in which women in leadership live also affect their performance of leadership roles. Administrative challenges such as gender stereotypic comments that are made in reference to decisions made by women claim that decisions of women leaders are not valid or not in the interest of followers. Sometimes there is resistant to implementing decisions of female educational leaders. Largely, some women in leadership sacrifice their family duties in order to be effective at their leadership positions.

In the light of the findings, the following recommendations are made to improve situations for women in educational leadership positions. The government and other corporate organisations need to invest in female leadership training programmes that can offer psychological support for female educational leadership. Such workshops would also offer social network support in terms of opportunities to build networks and to share in the experiences of other colleagues.

Also, women and gender-based organisations need to provide support services and opportunities to develop the capacities of women. The programmes should be aimed at preparing them for leadership positions. The Ghana Education Service and women Non-Governmental Organizations should organise awareness programmes on challenges facing women in educational leadership. This would expose women to these challenges and the strategies required to deal with them.

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