



SOCIO-CULTURAL AND SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR WOMEN'S UNDER-REPRESENTATION IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL HEADSHIP POSITIONS IN AHAFO REGION, GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Women play a key role in educational leadership and management, yet they are under-represented in school headship positions in Ghana and across the globe. This study explored the socio-cultural and school-related factors responsible for women's under-representation in senior high school headship positions in the Ahafo Region of Ghana. It employed a case study design underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm and involved five (5) female heads of the schools selected through a homogeneous sampling technique. Data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide and analysed thematically. The study revealed that socio-cultural factors such as the non-involvement of women in decision-making in societies, marriage-related responsibilities, and gender discrimination affected women's representation in headship positions negatively. It also emerged that school-related factors, including the preference by old students' associations and appointing panels for male leaders, accounted for women's under-representation in leadership positions in schools. The study concluded, among others, that negative perceptions of female leadership and discrimination against women in some communities affected their involvement in decision-making, a phenomenon linked to their under-representation in Senior High School headship positions. Therefore, the study recommended, among others, that various directorates of education in the region should collaborate with the leadership of Senior High Schools, such as the Conference of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools, to organise programmes that raise awareness about gender discrimination and stereotypical tendencies in headship positions, and strategise to address such issues.

KEYWORDS: Women, Headship, School-related factors, Socio-cultural, Under-representation

INTRODUCTION

The role of leaders, both male and female, is considered an indispensable factor in promoting teaching and learning in educational organisations (Kusi, 2008).

Undoubtedly, the success or failure of schools depends largely on the way they are managed by both female and male leaders. However, for a long time in many countries, school leadership, in particular, has been dominated by males,

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although it is established that the teaching profession is female-dominated. For example, in the United Kingdom, O'Connor (2015) reported that the ratio of male to female workforce in schools was 38 and 60 percent respectively. However, while the number of female teachers in schools was higher than that of their male counterparts, only 36 percent of female teachers held leadership positions. Women's under-representation in leadership role is a prevailing phenomenon in the education sector/system of Ghana. Data sets collected from the Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS) departments of regional education offices across Ghana reveal a pronounced under-representation of women in the public Senior High School (SHS) headship positions. For instance, in the Central Region, only 26 out of 75 schools are led by women, while the Volta Region records a mere 10 out of 68 schools with female leadership, and the Oti Region reports just 3 out of 25 schools headed by women. Similarly, the Western Region has 14 out of 36 schools with female leaders, whereas the Western North Region shows an even smaller fraction, with only 2 out of 18 schools headed by women. The northern parts of Ghana exhibit an even starker disparity. In the Northern Region, only 7 out of 36 schools are led by women, while the North-East Region and Savanna Region each record just 1 out of 17 and 18 schools, respectively, with female heads. Meanwhile, the Eastern Region shows a modestly better representation, with female leadership present in 39 out of 93 schools, and the Ashanti Region, though larger in scale, has only 40 out of 145 schools under the leadership of women. Notably, the Greater Accra Region represents a relatively more balanced distribution, with women heading 23 out of its 48 public Senior High Schools (SHSs). In the Ahafo Region, the context of this study, only 5 of the SHSs were led by women, suggesting a prevailing gender imbalance in headship positions.

Thus, the data sets gathered from EMIS departments of various regional education directorates highlight the general under-representation of women in SHS headship positions across Ghana — a worrying situation which calls for research to uncover the factors responsible for the phenomenon.

Eguac and De Jesus (2024) revealed that women leaders are known for building trust, exhibiting professional expertise, building relationships with stakeholders and the community, and initiating collaboration with teachers. The under-representation of women in school leadership positions deprives institutions of the valuable professional qualities and skills they bring to such roles.

The under-representation of women in leadership in education and other sectors has been a matter of concern to many across the globe. Therefore, over the years there has been sustained commitment on the part of many governments and organisations to eliminate any form of discrimination and barriers to women's advancement into leadership roles. For example, the Government of Ghana has supported several national and international gender declarations and conventions. Among these are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 2009), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). All these international declarations reiterate the need to eliminate all forms of discrimination, especially against women, to enhance the right to education, and promote gender equality particularly in education and gender inclusion and empowerment. Despite these efforts, women remain under-represented in leadership positions in various sectors, particularly in education.

In Ghana, several studies have been conducted to ascertain the factors responsible for women's under-representation in SHS leadership. For example, Kusi (2016) explored the factors responsible for women's under-representation in SHS leadership in Kumasi metropolis. A study conducted by Iddrisu (2018) focused on under-representation of female SHS leaders in Upper West region. Okai (2024) and Kusi (2019) examined the factors responsible for the low representation of women in SHS leadership in Bono Region. Interestingly, all these studies conducted in Ghana employed a case study design to explore the phenomenon of women's under-representation. However, case studies are limited by the inability of researchers to generalise findings to a wider context as samples are often relatively small, and unrepresentative of study populations.

Moreover, the studies in Ghana were conducted in contexts other than the Ahafo Region, which is the focus of the present study. Although data gathered from the EMIS Department of the region suggests under-representation of women in SHS headship positions, it appears no empirical study has been conducted to ascertain the factors responsible for the phenomenon. Literature suggests that the factors responsible for under-representation of women in school headship positions are multifaceted, including personal, socio-cultural and organisation related issues. This study employed a case study design to explore the socio-cultural and school-related factors responsible for the phenomenon in the Ahafo Region of Ghana. Denscombe (2003) indicates that theoretical justifications for selecting a place for research include suitability for theory building, deviation from the norm, and typicality. Typicality, according to Denscombe (2003), is the most common justification offered for selecting a case for study, invoking the logic that *"the case is similar in crucial aspects to others that might have been chosen, and that the findings from the case study are likely to be applied elsewhere"* (p. 33). Although available data suggest women's under-representation in SHS headship positions across various regions in Ghana, the Ahafo Region was selected for this study based on Denscombe's principle of typicality.

Research Objectives

The study sought to explore the:

1. Socio-cultural factors responsible for the under-representation of women in the SHS headship positions in the Region.
2. School-related factors accounting for the women's under-representation in the SHS headship positions.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What are the socio-cultural factors responsible for the under-representation of women in the SHS headship positions in the Region?
2. What are the school-related factors accountable for the women's under-representation in the SHS headship positions?

This study is significant in several ways. As various governments and organisations make efforts to enhance women's representation in leadership across different sectors, the findings of this study will serve as a basis for strategies that could be employed to achieve that goal.

Additionally, the study contributes to the literature on strategies and policies for promoting women into leadership roles. It could also serve as the basis for local policies aimed at advancing women into educational leadership positions in the region.

Ahafo Region in Context

The Ahafo Region is one of the newly-created regions in Ghana, carved out of the erstwhile Bono Ahafo Region in 2019. The Region is bordered by the Western North, Ashanti, and Bono Regions. With Goaso as its capital, the region is known for its natural resources, including forest reserves, mineral deposits, cocoa and fertile land primarily used for agriculture. The region is relatively less-developed, boasting of a few tertiary educational institutions (health and teacher training colleges) and a number of pre-tertiary institutions. The inhabitants are mainly Akans (Ashantis and Bonos), who are predominantly agrarians, with few working in the formal and informal sectors of the Ghanaian economy. Overall, the Ahafo Region remains less developed, with a few urban areas and some notable tourist attractions in the country.

The Concept of Educational Leadership

Leadership is viewed as a process whereby an individual influences other to work for the attainment of set goals of an organisation. It is the ability of an individual to work with others to achieve the goals and objectives of an organisation. As indicated earlier, the leadership provided by school heads, both male and female, is very crucial for the success of their respective organisations (Northouse, 2018; Kusi, 2017). This recognition has motivated countries across the globe to make huge financial commitments in major initiatives to bring about improvement in educational leadership and management for enhanced quality education provision (Kusi, 2017, 2019). For example, the government of Ghana recognises the key role of education leaders and managers in quality education provision and emphasises leadership development in its Ghana Education Strategic Plan (2018 – 2030).

This recognition has led to the introduction of policies and programmes, which seek to equip both the aspiring and practising heads of pre-tertiary and tertiary educational institutions for their respective roles and responsibilities. One such initiative is the Professional Education Leadership Programme, a tailor-made programme that seeks to prepare practitioners for leadership and management roles at basic, secondary and tertiary levels of education.

Educational leadership encompasses various functions and activities in which heads of schools guide, shape and influence the learning environment for attainment of educational goals, which are often facilitated through collaboration with key stakeholders such as teachers, students, parents, communities, and the governments (Gobena, 2014; Mankoe, 2007). Heads of schools, who serve as leaders, have the responsibility of guiding and influencing stakeholders for the fulfilment of organisational goals, and for school improvement efforts, fostering a positive learning environment, creating visions for their respective organisations, and energising their staff to work to fulfill set visions (Kusi, 2017).

For decades, leadership in general and educational leadership in particular was regarded as a preserve of men, making it difficult for women to ascend into such positions. Globally, the teaching profession is female dominated, but leadership and managerial positions are male dominated (Kusi, 2019; Iddrisu, 2018). Available literature suggests that women are under-represented in SHS headship positions in Ghana, and in most countries in the world, despite efforts by governments and international agencies to bridge the gender gap in leadership.

Theoretical Review

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws from three main theories: liberal feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and role congruity theory. The framework is supported by empirical evidence from various studies and research findings in the field of gender equality and leadership.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the relevance of liberal feminist theory in understanding and addressing gender disparities in leadership positions. Research has shown that women continue to face systemic barriers in

accessing leadership roles, including discrimination in hiring and promotion processes, unequal pay, and limited representation in decision-making bodies (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Sadler et al., 2020). For instance, a study by Eagly and Karau (2002) found that gender stereotypes often lead to bias against women leaders, with perceptions of women as less competent or authoritative than men. This evidence highlights the ongoing challenges faced by women in leadership, aligning with the principles of liberal feminist theory.

Intersectionality theory recognises the interconnectedness of various social identities and their impact on individuals' experiences of discrimination and marginalisation. Studies have shown that women from marginalised racial, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds face compounded barriers in accessing leadership positions compared to their white, affluent counterparts (Lorber, 2010; Syed, 2010). For example, research by Viruell-Fuentes et al. (2012) demonstrated how the intersection of race, gender, and class shapes women's experiences of discrimination and influences their opportunities for leadership. This empirical evidence underscores the importance of considering intersecting identities in understanding gender inequality in leadership roles.

Furthermore, role congruity theory highlights the role of gender stereotypes and biases in shaping perceptions of women's leadership abilities. Research has shown that societal expectations of women as communal and nurturing often clash with the agentic qualities associated with effective leadership, leading to prejudice and discrimination against women leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Sadler et al., 2020). For instance, a study by Eagly and Karau (2002) found that women leaders are often evaluated less favourably than men due to perceived incongruity between their gender and leadership roles. This empirical evidence provides insight into the ways in which gender stereotypes influence the advancement of women in leadership positions, supporting the principles of role congruity theory.

Empirical research in the field of gender equality and leadership thus provides substantial support for the theoretical framework presented above. By grounding the study in these theories and their empirical foundations, a deeper understanding was gained of women's under-representation in

Ghana.

Conceptual Models of Women's Participation in Educational Leadership

There are quite a considerable number of inter-related conceptual models that are used to explain women's under-representation in leadership and management. The models highlighted in literature include the international model, organisational model, individual model, and social model. According to the international model, child-care support for households is a contributing factor in gender equality in educational leadership. Nonetheless, equality in gender in educational leadership will be low if the variables from international to personal level could not encourage women's aspirations to school and women's access to educational leadership (Gobena, 2014). The central belief of the organisational model is that women do not participate in leadership because men are given preferential treatment in both promotional and administrative practices. These practices constitute structural and systemic barriers that disadvantage all candidates who are not male (Gobena, 2014). The organisational model conceptualises the disparities in the professional ambitions and accomplishments of men and women as resulting from systematic gender biases, rather than from psychological predispositions (Tallerico & Burstyn, 2006). The model argues that "people adjust their aspirations to that which is possible and that women in education do not aspire to leadership as a result of limited opportunity" (Grady, 1992, p. 23).

The individual model, depicts that people are promoted based on their ability (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Gobena, 2014). This model argues that men are more competent than women, reason why they are chosen to occupy the top-level positions in educational institutions. Men are believed to be better qualified to lead. The individual model is linked to Shakeshaft's (1998) "internal barriers", which positions women at low status and considers them not competent enough to occupy leadership positions in educational organisations. According to the social model, "the social structure of society is the root cause of inequities" (Shakeshaft, 1998, p. 83). This model argues that women and men have been taught to identify their

roles separately, and that institutional and societal practices reinforcing these differences account for the under-representation of women in leadership positions (Gobena, 2014). The social model posits that the different socialisation processes to which boys and girls are exposed in society and institutions are reinforced well into adulthood. According to Schmuck (2000), "the folkways and norms of the society coincide with different socialisation patterns and channel women and men into different areas of work, which are assigned differential pay and status" (p. 244). The assumption of the social model is that the absence of women in leadership positions is due to these distinct socialisation patterns (Asamoah, 1996). The model suggests that women would undoubtedly occupy top-level positions in school leadership if societal norms and values that restrict them were eliminated.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach underpinned by social constructivism, also known as the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm asserts that our understanding of the social world or a phenomenon is deepened when we attempt to comprehend it from the perspectives of the people being studied (Kusi, 2012). Specifically, a case study design was employed for the study. According to Punch (2005),:

The case study aims to understand the case in-depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context. It also has a holistic focus, aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case (144).

A case study design was considered appropriate for this study as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of women's under-representation in SHS leadership. The study was regarded as an intrinsic case study, since the primary aim was to understand the factors accounting for the low representation of women in SHS leadership. It was also a single case study, as it involved a detailed investigation of the phenomenon and the participants as a group (Kusi, 2012).

Population and Sampling Strategy

Population can be defined as the entire group of individuals that is of interest to a researcher and whom the findings of the study is applicable to. In research, population can be categorised into

target and accessible population. The target population for this study consisted of all female heads of public SHSs in Ghana and the accessible population was the five (5) female heads of the schools in Ahafo Region of the country. Homogeneous sampling strategy was employed to involve all the five (5) female heads in the study. According to Creswell (2008), researchers who use homogeneous sampling include individuals or sites in their studies based on shared traits or characteristics. These female heads were included because they possessed common features such as gender, current occupation of SHS headship positions, leadership roles in the same region, and attainment of at least the rank of Assistant Director II in the Ghana Education Service. These similarities merited their inclusion through the homogeneous sampling technique.

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. A semi-structured interview is a data collection technique widely used in qualitative research, particularly in the social sciences (Pin, 2023) and in education (Kusi, 2012). This method was chosen due to its flexibility, allowing participants the opportunity to express their views and experiences regarding the phenomenon under study freely. Furthermore, it gave me, the researcher, the freedom to deviate from the interview schedule to seek clarifications or use probing questions during the interview process.

Prior to the data collection, efforts were made to establish the validity of the interview guide. Face validity was established by a few colleague lecturers at my institution, while content validity was confirmed by two (2) professors in the field of educational leadership and management.

Data Analysis

In line with the social constructivist or interpretivist paradigm that underpinned the study, the qualitative data collected were analysed thematically. Conversations with the participants were audio-recorded, necessitating the transcription of the recordings. After transcription, I immersed myself in the transcripts to familiarise myself with relevant issues. I then developed codes, which were subsequently categorised into relevant themes, guided by the purpose of the study. The data was described in relation to these themes, using direct quotations from participants to add "realism" to the analysis.

As indicated earlier, five (5) female heads participated in the study. In order to attribute comments to specific participants, each was assigned a serial number ranging from FH-1 to FH-5, where "FH" represents Female Head.

Positionality and Reflexivity

As an expert and practitioner in the field of educational leadership and management, I began this research with my own prior knowledge, values, and assumptions about women's representation in educational leadership, and SHS headship. This positioned me within a specific context of positionality, which could have had a potential impact on the research process, especially during data analysis and interpretation. To address the possible influence of my background, I made a conscious effort to allow the data to "speak for itself" by bracketing my personal beliefs.

Reflexivity, defined as the continuous effort by researchers to reflect on how their assumptions, backgrounds, values, and experiences influence the research process, was central to this study. I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the data collection and analysis stages by critically considering my own positionality and background.

Trustworthiness of the study

According to McMillan (2010), trustworthiness refers to the process of ensuring the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of a qualitative inquiry. The criteria help, among other things, to ensure the rigour of a study. First, I ensured the credibility of the findings by spending prolonged time in the research context to interview participants and by documenting every stage of the research process (Schreier, 2012). To ensure dependability, I audio-recorded the interviews, which allowed for a verbatim account of each session. This approach enabled me to listen attentively and capture participants' words accurately (Gray, 2013). Further, dependability was ensured through an inquiry audit, which involved inviting colleagues to examine the processes of data collection, analysis, and the results of the study. Transferability is considered the qualitative equivalent of generalisability in quantitative research (Kusi, 2012). While my aim was not to generalise the findings beyond the Ahafo Region, the results may be applicable to contexts that share similar characteristics.

I further ensured transferability by providing a thick description of the research context and findings (Shenton, 2004). Confirmability was achieved through an audit trail, which helped ensure that the study's conclusions were not based on my initial assumptions or preconceived notions. Rather, they were grounded in the data collected during the study (Kusi, 2012).

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The data collected for this study was categorised under two main themes: socio-cultural, and school-related factors responsible for the under-representation of women in the Ahafo region. The issues related to each of the themes are presented, analysed and discussed in this section of the paper.

Socio-cultural Factors Responsible for Women's Under-representation in the SHS Headship

Several socio-cultural factors contributing to the under-representation of women in SHS headship positions emerged from the data. These issues were related to family migration, marriage-related challenges, negative perceptions about female leadership, and the low involvement of women in community decision-making.

The data revealed that female teachers who were potential candidates for headship positions often migrated from the region to the southern part of the country to join their partners, limiting the schools to appoint female heads.

I have lived and worked in this school for over 20 years, and I have observed something. Sometimes, I can see female teachers who are potential heads, but by the time you realise, they have sought transfer to the south [of the country]. This makes it difficult for us to get female heads for our schools [FH-2].

My worry is that most of our female teachers who have the potential to succeed us often leave to join their husbands in Accra or nearby cities [FH-5]

These comments suggest that family migration accounts for the limited number of women in SHS headship positions within the context of the study. The participants attributed this situation to the limited developmental opportunities available for children in the region, which compels female teachers to seek better prospects elsewhere.

You have travelled around this region, or you might have read about it. You can see it is mainly a rural area, with some few semi-urban areas.

Therefore, this place offers limited opportunities for growing-up children of the teachers. For this reason, they migrate to the urban areas in the South [of the country] [FH-2]

Most of the teachers, including the potential heads, often seek transfers because, there are limited opportunities for their children here in this region. They want their children to grow-up and experience the city life, so, they leave [FH-5].

Thus, these comments highlight that the region offers limited opportunities for the children of teachers, prompting them to migrate to areas with better prospects. Although the issue of migration emerged during the interviews, it has received little attention in the existing literature. Most female teachers prefer to take subordinate roles in the Southern and Middle Belts of the country rather than accept headship positions in rural areas of Ghana due to limited infrastructural facilities (Okai, 2024; Iddrisu, 2018).

The data further suggested that marital status influenced the ability of female teachers to ascend into SHS headship positions. Three dimensions of marital issues were highlighted in the data: spousal distance (or distance gap), child-caring responsibilities, and divorce. The findings revealed that some of the female teachers who were potential candidates for headship had spouses living in cities, creating what participants referred to as a "marriage gap." This situation placed additional pressure on these women to preserve their marriages. The physical separation from their husbands created feelings of insecurity, dividing their attention between professional responsibilities and marital commitments.

I have a few female teachers, who have the potential to become SHS heads. But, the issue is that they have their husbands living and working in the cities. This makes it difficult for them to concentrate on developing themselves, as they think about how to secure their marriages, which makes it makes it difficult for them to develop professionally [FH-1].

These days, I think it is dangerous for women in general to stay far away from their husbands. Most of my female staff are facing this challenge. Their husbands are staying far away from them and this poses marital security issues for them. They always discuss marital challenges they face with me. Sometimes you ask them [the female teachers] and it is a big problem [FH-3].

Thus, the female-teacher spouse distance-gap caused insecurity for potential female school heads as it tends to divide their attention, distracting continuous professional development efforts. Marriage and leadership are both associated with multiple responsibilities, which pose significant challenges for women—both practising and aspiring leaders. Kusi (2004), in his study of female heads of high schools in Bedfordshire, UK, found that those who occupied such positions were often single, divorced, or had adult children—a status that allowed them to focus more effectively on their professional development and the performance of their leadership roles and responsibilities.

Another dimension of marital issues that emerged from the data as impeding women's effort towards SHS headship positions was related to child-care. The participants believed that such situations posed a challenge to the female teachers' professional commitments and development as they had to combine these roles with child-care.

As you know, I am a mother, and you also appreciate the fact that bringing up children these days is not easy. This is where most of my female teachers find themselves! They must care for their young children and perform their professional responsibilities which is not easy at all. Only few of them can develop themselves professionally to become heads! [FH-1]

One of the factors I believe contributes to the fewer numbers of females in headship is the fact that most of the teachers have younger children they must care for. They always come to seek permission from me to take their children to the hospital, to school, and other issues. You can't combine professional responsibilities with this tedious job of child-care and develop to become a head of a school [FH-4].

These comments highlight the multiple roles performed by potential aspiring female heads, as they were required to combine professional responsibilities with child-care. According to the international model of women's participation in leadership, child-care contributes to gender inequality in school leadership. Child-care and related marital responsibilities place significant demands on women's time, energy, and other resources, making it difficult for them to develop and progress in their careers. The female heads appeared to experience role conflict, being caught between competing responsibilities. Palomino and

Frezatti (2016) define role conflict as the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations that make the performance of one role difficult or incompatible with another. In this context, the under-representation of women in headship positions seemed to stem from the challenge of balancing child-care and marital duties with continuous professional development, thus posing a significant barrier to their leadership progression.

The data also revealed that marital status of divorce, however, influenced and motivated female teachers to develop themselves professionally for headship. For these women, divorce served as a source of "positive energy," enabling them to focus on their personal and professional growth. The absence of spousal responsibilities provided them with the opportunity to dedicate more time and attention to preparing for school leadership roles.

I have worked here for many years, and now, I am a head of a school. My observation is that some of the females who are seriously developing themselves to become heads are divorced. This [marital status] makes them concentrate on their personal and professional development. In the past, and even now, some of my heads were divorced and this makes them concentrate on performing their assigned professional responsibilities [FH-3].

FH-3 explained the reason for the ability of the female teacher divorcees to prepare for SHS headship:

.Hmmm! I have interacted with some of my colleague female heads and what I have realised from them is that they always want to prove to their ex-husbands that they are capable and strong people. This intention motivates them to prepare for leadership [FH-3].

It appeared divorce and its consequences for the women make them channel their energies towards something positive and, in this case, developing themselves for school leadership positions.

Another socio-cultural issue that emerged from the data as responsible for women's under-representation in headship positions was related to negative perception about female leadership. The data suggested that some of the communities in the region seemed to have accepted male dominance in leadership, making it difficult for women to be appointed as leaders.

This perception in turn reflects in the appointment of women as heads of the schools.

We women are disadvantaged when it comes to appointments of heads [of SHS].

In some of these communities, they still believe women cannot be good leaders, so, even if, you become one [a leader], they still see you as a man. It is difficult for us here! [FH-3]

FH-3 recounted her personal experience in relation to how society perceived her leadership:

... when I was appointed the head of this school, I faced a lot of challenges particularly with the male teachers and the community members. This is because, they believe the leadership history of the school does not capture women. Even the old students living in this community and the nearby ones were a problem to me.

This comment suggested that the societal negative perception about female leadership [seeing leadership as a male hegemony] affected the appointment of women as heads of secondary schools in the study area. Similarly, the liberal feminist and intersectionality theories point out discrimination and marginalisation against women in leadership positions, attributing these to many factors, including negative perception about their leadership effectiveness and low-representation on panels that appoint people to leadership positions (Sadler et al., 2020). The role congruity theory also emphasises the role of gender stereotyping and biases in shaping people's perceptions about leadership abilities of women. Lastly, another socio-cultural factor that emerged from the data as limiting the number of females in SHS headship was related to limited opportunities available for women to participate in decision-making processes within their communities. The participants believed that this situation had translated to the practice of limiting women positioned to make major decisions affecting the schools.

One issue I would like to raise is that in this community and the nearby ones, you realise only few women participate in decisions made. It is always about chiefs, Assemblymen and other male politicians. Very few women, mainly queens, participate in decision-making. This is reflecting in the leadership of our schools! [FH-1] When it comes to participating in decision-making, only a few women in this community are involved.

I am, therefore, not surprised we have few women leading our secondary schools [FH-3]

These comments point out that low representation of women in headship positions in the study area was linked to the limited opportunities offered to women to participate in decision-making in the communities. Limited or non-involvement of women in decision-making, according to Shakeshaft (1998), is attributed to the social structure of society, which teaches men and women to identify their social roles separately. In most traditional and agrarian Ghanaian societies and cultures, women are expected to take advice and instructions from men, as it is a taboo for a woman to lead a society or a group (Okai, 2024, Iddrisu, 2018). Attempts by women to advise and instruct men is considered 'uncultural' or undermining men's authority. This cultural practice had affected women's representation in the SHS headship positions in the region. However, a study conducted in the Bono region by Okai (2024) indicted that the absence of females in SHS headship positions was insignificantly linked to perceived lack of women's involvement in decision-making process in the community.

School-Related Factors Responsible for Women's Under-representation in the SHS Headship

School-related factors that contributed to the under-representation of women in SHS headship also emerged from the data. These included the preference of old students' associations for male heads, the bias of appointing panels and committees toward male leadership, and the absence of deliberate mentorship policies in the schools.

The data further indicated that old students and their associations exert significant influence on the appointment of school heads. These stakeholders often prefer male heads over female ones, as the following comments illustrate:

You can see, there are many secondary schools in the region, but very few of us women have the opportunity to lead schools. The issue is that there are old students' associations that have the power to influence the appointment processes. These old students' associations, in most cases, want their schools to have male heads instead of female heads [FH-5].

Here in this region, like other parts of the country, the old students' associations have been influencing the appointment processes. My observation is that they always prefer male heads to female heads of their schools [FH-3].

It emerged from the data that old students and alumni associations of various schools preferred male heads, which contributed to the under-representation of women in headship positions. Some participants attributed this preference to challenges confronting the schools, as well as prevailing perceptions about female leadership.

The data further revealed that some schools in the region were prone to student demonstrations. As a result, old students perceived male leaders as more capable of handling such recurring disciplinary issues, thereby favouring them for headship roles.

I know about a couple of schools closer to mine, where there are always students riots and demonstrations. The old students, therefore, believe they need a male head who will provide a strong and aggressive leadership to address such re-curring situations [FH-1].

FH-4 also cited a reason for the perception of the old students:

It has always been the case. The old students believe male heads provide stronger leadership [for schools] than their female counterparts. I can see that is how they [the old students] see things, so they always favour men for headship.

The perceptions of some alumni (old students) suggest that male heads provide stronger leadership for their respective schools, limiting women's representation in headship positions. Gender stereotyping seemed to have negatively affected women's representation in the leadership positions in the schools. The organisational model of women's under-representation in leadership argues that individuals are promoted based on perceived ability, often reinforcing the notion that men are more competent than women in administrative roles. Shakeshaft (1998) describes this as an internal barrier, which positions women at a lower status and portrays them as incompetent to occupy school leadership positions.

Similarly, it emerged from the data that low representation of women in the headship positions was attributed to the preference of the appointing panels for male heads. It emerged that male heads were considered to have the capacity to

address some disciplinary issues of the students in some communities, as the following comments suggest:

We are interviewed by Ghana Education Service officials at the regional and other levels. When we go there and are being interviewed, you can see the panel sometimes want people who will be strong in terms of leadership. They always want to settle on male heads! [FH-3]

.....As I said earlier, a number of schools in this region are noted for students' indiscipline and demonstrations. Therefore, the appointing panels are always interested in getting 'strong males', who can provide strong leadership to address such issues when they happen again [FH-1].

The comments also attributed the low representation of women in SHS headship to the preference of appointing authorities for male candidates over females. These authorities believed that male heads were better equipped to handle disciplinary issues than their female counterparts. Feminine stereotypes can hinder women's participation in SHS headship positions (Okai, 2024; Iddrisu, 2018), as female leaders are often perceived negatively by staff—as old, inexperienced, or less qualified teachers (Makura, 2009). Coleman (2009) observed that in patriarchal systems, women are frequently viewed as ineffective leaders, a perception that can significantly affect their chances of being appointed to leadership positions (Mollel & Tshabangu, 2014).

One of the participants shared her opinion regarding the composition of the appointing panels:

When I was invited for the headship interview, I realised that most of the panel members were men, and one or two women. I was not comfortable at all because we know when men dominate a panel, they often favour male applicants than female applicants [FH-3].

The preference of male dominated appointing panels for male heads of the schools suggest discrimination against females. The social model of women's participation in leadership argues that women are under-represented in such positions because men are given special treatment and favour in terms of promotion, and that there are both structural and systematic barriers that operate against women (Gobena, 2014; Tallerico & Burstyn, 2006).

The liberal feminist theory indicates many systemic barriers preventing women from accessing leadership positions, including limited representation in decision-making bodies.

Lastly, the participants attributed the phenomenon of women's under-representation in the school headship to the absence of mentors in the schools, as the following comments suggest: If you are a professional and want to develop professionally to progress within your profession, you need a mentor, who will support and guide you. But, it is difficult to come by such people in our schools these days. We need people who will volunteer to support staff, particularly females to grow professionally [FH-4].

Our potential and aspiring female heads, in particular, need to be mentored so that they will be well-prepared for their future headship aspirations and roles. However, you can ask the female teachers who have headship ambitions, whether they have mentors. These people [mentors] are not available in our schools [FH-1].

These comments suggest a lack of deliberate mentorship policies in the schools, which limits support for staff development. Mentors play a critical role in supporting and influencing the personal and professional growth of staff, both male and female. Therefore, the absence of structured mentorship opportunities denies aspiring heads the chance to build their leadership capacities.

FH-1 attributed the lack of mentors in the schools to unhealthy competition among the staff for positions:

...My observation is that our staff, both males and females, always compete for positions and sometimes what I hear is not pleasant at all. In such situations, do you think they will mentor and support each other? Most of them might not!

Thus, unhealthy competition among staff to fulfill competing needs discouraged them from mentoring colleagues for leadership positions in the schools. Asuo-Baffour, Agyabeng and Kusi (2019) indicated that there was little evidence of the effectiveness of mentoring in schools in the context of their study, affecting teacher leadership development negatively. Mentors help inexperienced colleagues to acquire knowledge and skills in leadership, and build their confidence (Kusi, 2017). The absence of mentoring as a deliberate model means that the women,

particularly the aspiring female heads of the SHSs were losing some 'key ingredients' needed to assume leadership positions, a situation that limits their representation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Two key conclusions were drawn from the study. First, marriage and its associated responsibilities—such as migration to join husbands in urban areas for marital security and child-caring — posed significant challenges for potential female heads of SHSs in the region, thereby limiting their representation in headship positions. It is therefore recommended that the Ahafo Regional, Municipal, and District Education Directorates collaborate with the leadership of SHSs to introduce guidance and counselling programmes aimed at supporting aspiring female heads in managing marital responsibilities and child-care related issues. Such a support system will help these aspiring leaders balance their multiple roles, enabling them to focus on their personal and professional growth and development toward SHS headship.

Second, it could be concluded that the preference of old students' associations and appointing panels for male heads, who they believed had leadership capacity to address student indiscipline issues limited women's representation in the SHS headship. Negative perceptions held about female leadership and discrimination against women in some communities in the region lead to their non-involvement in decision-making, a phenomenon which reflected in the appointment of heads of the SHSs. It is, therefore, recommended that various directorates of education in the region collaborate with the leadership of the SHSs such as the Conference of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools in the area to organise programmes that will raise awareness about gender (women) discrimination and stereo-typical tendencies in headship positions. Also, there is the need for the education authorities in the region to, if possible, promote affirmative action policies that would enhance opportunities created for aspiring and practicing female heads. Implementing deliberate mentorship policies and programmes could also help equip the aspiring female heads, in particular, with relevant knowledge, skills and competencies, building their confidence for educational leadership roles.

Limitations of the Study

Like all qualitative studies, this study has certain limitations. First, the sample comprised five (5) female heads of the SHSs in the Ahafo Region — the specific context of the study. As such, the findings cannot be generalised beyond SHSs in the region led by women. However, they offer valuable insights into the socio-cultural and school-related factors contributing to the under-representation of women in SHS headship. Readers may apply the findings to other contexts that share similar characteristics with the study setting.

Additionally, the sample consisted of only female SHS heads in the region. During data collection and interpretation, it became apparent that the perspectives of male heads, education authorities, and members of the appointment panels could have clarified and verified some of the claims made by the female participants regarding gender-discriminatory practices in the appointment process. While the exclusion of these stakeholder groups represents a limitation, it does not compromise the credibility of the study's findings.

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