Evidence-Based Study into the Coping Demands of Headmistresses in Selected Senior High Schools in the Kumasi Metropolis: A Mixed Method Study

Adu Gyamfua Kessie Agyekum*
Texila American University, Nicaragua

Abstract

Management of academic institutions is a daunting task since humans are placed at the center of all activities carried out in that space. Despite the continuous supply of human and material resources by various governments to supervise, plan, strategize, and implement structures for an expected result, there still exist loopholes. This study uses the mixed method technique to examine the coping demands of headmistresses in selected senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis of Ghana. Using the cross-sectional study design with purposive sampling, this study was conducted on 14 female headmistresses from 14 senior high schools with the use of interview-based structured questionnaires with one-on-one interviews with headmistresses. Study results reveal that headmistresses' ambition and drive on their pathways to leadership, study results indicate that 57% of respondents agree is it through academic qualifications, followed by progressive promotion (36%) and finally intrinsic motivation (7%). On headmistresses coping mechanisms in their world of work, 50% reveal they ignore any form of negativity, followed by gender biases (48%) and personal reflection (2%). Again, study results revealed that headmistresses treat their critics as though they do not exist in dealing with negativity. This study recommends that upcoming research should consider these coping demands of female headmistresses relative to the demands of managing academic institutions zand state policies on education.

Keywords: Coping Demands, Evidence-Based, Ghana, Headmistresses, Mixed Method, Senior High Schools.

Introduction

Management of academic institutions is a vital part of human learning [1]; [2], with the opportunity of establishing unique codes of esteemed behavioural patterns [3]. It also establishes the circumstances for good instructional capacity and the development of cultural heritage for continuous learning for both educators and students [1]; [3]. Effective school leadership has proven to be a critical tool for improving school efficiency and equity [4]. The managements of most modern schools have shifted to the demands of contemporary societies [3]. Thus, much autonomy has been given to schools in their decision-making processes, and hence more outcomes expected of them [1]. This has thus has proven as synergies uniting stakeholders to meet expected outcomes as far as teaching and learning, with administrative decorum are concerned [3].

It is a general belief that the future of every society is reliant on education and for that matter schools. It is argued that education is an indispensable catalyst that strongly influences the development and economic fortunes of a nation and the quality of life of its people. The success of schools, however, depends on various school-related factors [5]. According to [6], the most important activity next to

classroom instruction is to improve students' learning in school leadership. School leaders play a crucial role in school change and school improvement [7]. The leadership provided by school heads, both males and females, is an indispensable factor in enhancing students' achievement and for that matter the success of schools [4].

The three main levels of schools in Ghana—basic, high, and tertiary—can be used to organize leadership practices and expectations in the educational sector. At the tertiary level, leadership practice and performance are more concerned with raising the visibility of the schools through research and the impacts graduates have on local, national, and international levels than they are at the elementary and high school levels, where they are more concerned with students' accomplishments in standardized examinations. Building pupils' broad intellectual foundations by assessing their areas of strength and weakness is the primary goal of basic education in Ghana [8]. At this point, the leadership responsibilities of school administrators are focused on developing curricula and pedagogy, forging solid partnerships with parents and the community, controlling class sizes, and raising students' success levels.

The intermediate stage of education known as Senior High School, on which this research is centred, lays the groundwork for students' future post-secondary specializations in both academics and careers. This level of education is crucial to Ghana's educational system because it calls for the leadership and direction of school administrators and instructors to help students make decisions that will shape their future professional growth. The SHS level is the most challenging stage in Ghana's educational architecture, since students' failure to succeed at this level might have detrimental long-term effects on both their academic and professional growth [8]. The SHS level also corresponds to the adolescent stage of students' lives, during which significant physiological and psychological changes take place and a number of individual decisions must be made.

According to [9], women have taken on more leadership roles in Ghana, with the educational sector being a standout example, and they continue to increase in number [10]. Since the 1990s, women have assumed leadership roles at all levels of government and in all fields of study. Women have held positions at the highest level, as headmistresses of Senior High Schools (SHS), and as vice-chancellors of public institutions [10]; [11]; [4]. The idea is that women can lead just as well as men, and in some cases have done so with even greater outcomes [10]. However, regardless of gender, the performance expectations in administrative leadership remain the same [10].

The notion of headmistresses coping strategies pertains to the methods employed by female school heads to effectively manage the various pressures and challenges that are inherent in their leadership positions. This entails comprehending their stress levels, the techniques they employ to uphold a balance between their professional and personal lives, and the impact of their emotional intelligence on their coping mechanisms. The concept under consideration may be influenced by various variables, such as the individual's personal resilience, support systems both personal and professional, as well as the demands and expectations associated with their roles. It is in this light that the study, therefore, explores the coping strategies used to negotiate the challenges headmistresses are confronted with in their professional career trajectory.

The involvement of female leadership in the field of academia cannot be overemphasized [5]; [11]. There has been widely acknowledged research on female inclusion in the educational sector in Ghana including those of [10], [12], [1], [11], [2] and [4], however, none of them has researched into the coping demands of headmistresses let alone using empirical views, thoughts and opinions of these female leaders.

The work of [10]. exclusively delt with promoting equity in school leadership appointment while that of [12] covers female teachers in general. The work of [1] also dwells on leadership and economic development of Ghana in general while that of [11] concentrates on Ghana's educational system and its implication for educational equity. Again, the work of [2] thrives on the role of leadership development in restructuring vocational and technical education in Ghana while that of [4] focuses on educational leadership and quality education in disadvantaged communities in Ghana and Tanzania. There is consequently the need to discover the coping demands of headmistresses in the helm of their daily strenuous affairs as heads of selected senior high schools. Therefore, this study is aimed at exploring the views, opinions, thoughts and interpretations of heads of selected senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis on their coping demands as heads of these academic institutions.

Methods

Study Settings and Design

This recent study was conducted in the Ashanti region of Ghana and was part of a broader study titled the lived experiences and coping strategies of selected headmistresses of senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis, due to the multicultural nature of the area. The study was conducted between March 1, 2022 and March 31, 2022. The study employed the mixed method of research inquiry to examine and discover the experiences, opinions and views of study respondents, to provide a more all-inclusive insights a research question [13]; [14]. Hence, the purpose of using mixed methods was to make the study comprehensive and more credible that a single technique cannot accomplish [15]; [16].

Design

The study employs a phenomenological research design in the execution of the study to meet the research objectives. Thus, the researcher wanted to investigate the everyday experiences of headmistresses of selected senior high schools while suspending personal preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon [17]. The personal experiences of respondents are understood based on the meaning found in their daily schedules and coping demands of such schedules. The research bordered on the constructivist theoretical framework to understand how female headmistresses cope with educational leadership demands. Hence, the goal of this study was to understand and interpret how headmistresses conceptualized the meaning of leaderships roles and how they cope with the difficulties associated with their leadership demands.

Study Population

This study consisted of all female headmistresses in the Ashanti Region and focused on 14 of them within the Kumasi Metropolis. Regarding the hierarchical structure of the schools, the school heads are at the top and are in charge of management and handling the everyday administration of the schools. Hence, the leadership strategy, course, and dream of the heads have crucial impact on the organizations' leadership practices and styles as well as the success of these institutions. In effect, female SHS school heads with at least two years of continuous experience in such a leadership role were included in the study.

Sample and sampling procedure

The multistage sampling technique involving simple random sampling, cluster sampling and purposive sampling was applied. The study purposively selected randomly one administrative region out of the sixteen regions of Ghana. In the selected region, cluster sampling was used to group senior high schools in the administrative districts within the region, and one metropolitan area was considered.

Finally, 14 female headteachers of senior high schools were purposively selected. The researcher then arrived at the desired sample size after saturation for selection was reached. Thus, direct feedback on the important concerns raised in the study requires purposeful direct engagement of the school heads. Hence, the study aimed to perform a thorough analysis of headmistresses' coping mechanism to their numerous demands and schedules.

Data collection procedure

The study data were collected between March 1, 2022 and March 31, 2022. Study consent was sought from authorities of selected Senior High Schools and respective respondents. The interviews were conducted to gain the perspective results of the topic on the coping demands of study participants. Again, the identities of study respondents, along with the responses from interviews and focus group discussions were kept confidential. As a result, measures were taken to protect the intellectual interests of study respondents and their involvement in this project somehow did not endanger their overall well-being. The interviews were conducted for a period of not more than 30 minutes and done in safe and convenient environment according to the choice of the selected participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using tables, bars and cones, and the phenomenological analytical framework, through the Colaizzi's eight-step strategy was used to analyze qualitative data from participants. The steps applied to analyze qualitative data are as follows:

Using the phenomenological analytical framework, the study used Colaizzi's eight-step strategy in describing participants' experiences of their coping demands (1978). The steps applied to analyse the study are as follows:

1. Read transcripts several times to get a sense of whole content;
2. Add to bracketing journal any thoughts, feelings, and ideas gained due to connection with topic;
3. Identify significant statements and phrases from transcript;
4. Aggregate formulated meanings from significant statements;
5. Provide categories, clusters of themes from meanings;
6. Integrate resulting ideas into exhaustive description of phenomenon;
7. Reduce exhaustive description to fundamental structure;
8. Return to participants for member checking; and
9. Validate exhaustive description and its fundamental structure

Transcripts for the study were read repeatedly throughout the coding process and formulated meanings from noteworthy statements were created from responses and provided categories. The researcher then integrated the results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Steps 7 and 9 were combined where the researcher reduced and validated the exhaustive description to a fundamental structure. Finally, themes were reviewed and checked against sampled transcripts to ensure consistency of narratives and themes.

Results

The leadership trajectories of the headmistresses within the Kumasi Metropolis showcase a myriad of experiences and pathways to ascendancy. Tracing the contours of their journeys provides a rich tapestry of professional growth, blending individual aspirations with systemic protocols set by the Ghana Education Service (GES). The findings of these background information of study participants are shown (see Table 1).

Table 1. Background Information of Participants

Participant	Year in Leadership Role	Previous Role(s)	Method of Progression
1	3 years (Headmistress) + 3 years (Assistant Headmistress)	Head of Department, Assistant Headmistress	Structured promotion through GES, interviews, moves due to family
2	+ 3 years Headmistress	AD II, AD I, Assistant Head	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and Interview
3	1 year (Headmistress) + 5 years (Assistant Head)	1 year (Headmistress) + 5 years (Assistant Head)	Progressed through management, became head of a newly absorbed school, faced challenges of establishing the school from scratch.
4	+4 years Headmistress	P.S, AD II, AD I, Assistant Headmistress	Sequential promotions through GES ranks: P.S. to AD II, AD II to AD I, then Assistant Headmistress
5	+4 years Headmistress	Guidance and Counselling Coordinator, HOD, Senior Housemistress, Assistant Headmistress	Rising through GES ranks, needed 3+ years in previous roles to apply for Assistant Headmistress, then 2+ years to apply for Headmistress
6	1 year (Headmistress) + 3 years (Assistant Head)	Head of Department, Assistant Headmistress	Progressive promotions through GES ranks: P.S. to AD II, AD II to AD I, then Assistant Headmistress
7	3 years Headmistress	Head of Department	Structured promotion through GES, interviews, push by old students 'recommendation
8	3 years (Headmistress) + 4 years (Assistant Head)	Housemistress, HOD, Assistant Headmistress	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and interview
9	6 years (Headmistress)	School chaplain as well as Assistant headmistress	Structured promotion through GES, interviews, and church structure

10	1 year (Headmistress) +3 years (Assistant Headmistress)	Guidance and Counselling Coordinator, Senior Housemistress	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and interview
11	3years Headship +5years Assistant Head	Head of Department, Assistant Headmistress Senior Housemistress Assistant Headmistress	Ambition, rising through GES ranks, exams, and interview, and church appointment
12	2years Headmistress 3years HOD, 5years housemistress	Housemistress, Head of Department Assistant Headmistress	Ambition and motivation GES ranks, exams, and interview
13	7yeas HOD 3years Headmistress	Head of Department, Headmistress	Rank, Interview, and Luck
14	2years Headmistress, 5years Assist 5years HOD	Housemistress, Head of Department Assistant Headmistress	Ambition and motivation GES ranks, exams, and interview

Source: Field work

Themes

The themes identified in the study as coping demands of headmistresses are outlined and presented below:

Theme 1: Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Leaders often face criticism, doubt, and scepticism from various external sources. Whether it is community judgments, workplace gossip, or societal standards, there is a plethora of negativity that can hinder a leader's performance and well-being especially being a female leader.

Participant 3 succinctly encapsulated this, stating,

" In the community, sometimes they look at you with a different eye. Why is this woman always coming from work late and all that? She's busy, she doesn't even talk to anybody when there is funeral, you don't even see this woman coming to greet and all that. But sometimes, you see, it's not your problem, but it's because of the work schedule at the office."

Theme 2: Ignoring Negativity

Leaders often face criticism, doubt, and scepticism from various external sources. Whether it's community judgments, workplace gossip, or societal standards, there's a plethora of negativity that can hinder a leader's performance and well-being. This subtheme emphasizes the importance of discerning which feedback to internalize and which to set aside.

In the process, the leader learns to remain steadfast in their vision and purpose, unwavering by external distractions.

Participant 6 succinctly encapsulated this, stating,

"Oh, you just behave as if they do not exist. Because if you want everything to bother you, you become depressed. And you know when you are growing old, high blood pressure and its associated diseases. So, you have to let go. You just listen to some of them or you hear some and you just smile and you just walk by. Because you know that doesn't state the truth."

Furthering this sentiment, Participant 5 mentioned,

" In the community, sometimes they look at you with a different eye. Why is this woman always coming from work late and all that? She's busy, she doesn't even talk to anybody when there is funeral, you don't even see this woman coming to greet and all that. But sometimes, you see, it's not your problem, but it's because of the work schedule at the office."

These sentiments highlight the importance of focusing on the larger picture and not getting bogged down by external negativity. These experiences are further corroborated by Fig. 1 below.

Table 2 Headmistresses' Coping Mechanisms in their World of Work

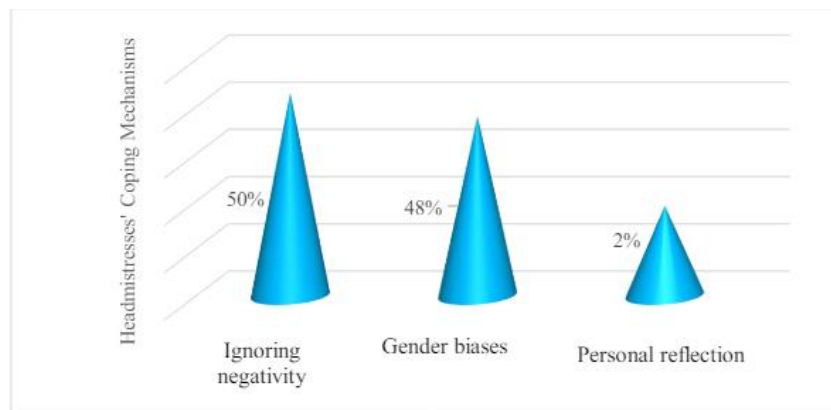| Coping mechanism	Value	Percentage (100%)
Ignoring negativity	7	50%
Gender biases	6	48%
Personal reflection	1	2%
Total	**14**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Figure. 1 Headmistresses' Coping Mechanisms in their World of Work

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Theme 3: Advocacy for Women

However, every challenge was met with resilience and an inherent desire to uplift other women. The headmistresses weren't just leaders; they were advocates, challenging biases and laying pathways for future women leaders. Participant 13 passionately declared,

"And what some people don't understand is that females, we are really working hard to also contribute our quota to the society. Some don't

think so. They think it's just a matter of us. We've been just pushed up, just for doing practically nothing. But we've been working hard and then we are moving up the social ladder and the academic ladder and in terms of positions."

Participant 10 added,

"You know, Ghanaian society, you've been a headmistress. It's a role model for the young ladies out there. So my leadership or my dream to become a headmistress has helped me to achieve that role of impacting positively to the

ladies, the young women, the young women in my community."

Their advocacy, grounded in their lived experiences, emerged as a clarion call to recognize and value the contributions of women in leadership roles.

In essence, the journey of these headmistresses encapsulates the multifaceted experiences of women in leadership. Navigating the tightropes of societal expectations and biases, they've not only carved their niche but have also championed the cause for more inclusive, gender-sensitive leadership paradigms. These findings are further supported by study results in Fig. 2 below.
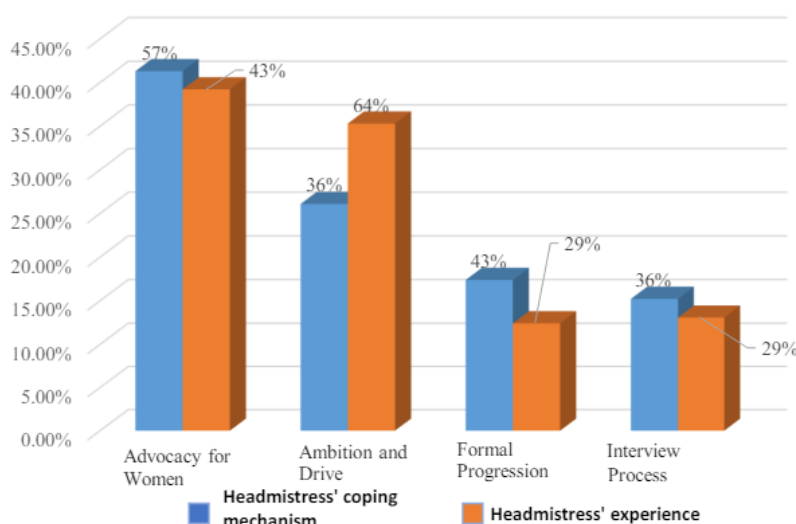

Figure 2. Leadership Experiences of Headmistresses

Source: *Field survey, 2023.*

Theme 4: Ambition and Drive

A common thread across the narratives was the intrinsic motivation and desire to ascend to leadership positions. This ambition often superseded any external factors and served as a driving force in their respective journeys. Participant 5 candidly expressed,

"Yes, it's been my ambition. I myself am a disciplinarian. And I have the conviction that if I have a group of students under me, together with myself, I will be able to discipline them. And then mould them into a good adult. And then you should know that if students are disciplined, they are

academically good. Because a disciplined student will obey all school rules and regulations and will sit down and learn. So that is my main reason for becoming a headmistress."

Such expressions signify a deep-rooted passion for leadership and the broader sphere of influence it entails. Additionally, Participant 1's reflection,

" Oh, yes. As I went to the training college, every teacher hopes to climb the ladder of even becoming the director in charge,"

Hence, participant 1 captures the essence of the inherent aspiration that many participants felt towards the role of a headmistress.

In sum, the path to leadership, as portrayed by the participants, is a blend of structured professional progressions, rigorous evaluations, and an inherent drive to lead.

Table 3: Headmistresses' Ambition and Drive

Pathways to leadership	Value	Percentage (100%)
Intrinsic motivation	1	7
Progressive promotion	5	36
Academic qualifications	8	57
Total	**14**	**100**

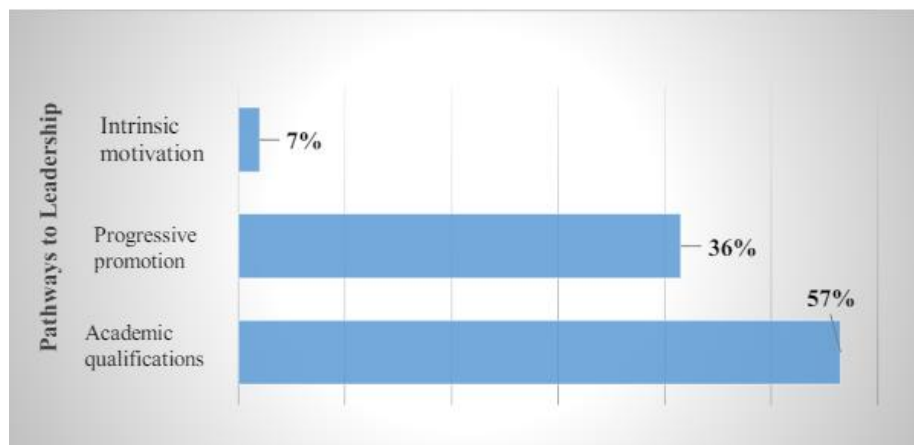**Fig 3:** Headmistresses' Ambition and Drive

Discussion

Study parameters sought to explore how headmistresses cope with the multifarious demands that are intrinsically associated with their roles as female leaders. Through the prismatic lens of the themes and subthemes emerged from the study data, there is intricate dynamics of leadership, resilience, and gender interplay. An indispensable facet of the headmistresses' experience is the spectrum of challenges they confront in leadership roles. The internal obstacles, particularly those arising from staff compliance (See Fig. 1), resonate with findings from [18], which underlined the frequent tensions between leadership decisions and staff adherence, especially in academic environments. Leaders are often left navigating a complex maze, seeking both assertion and collaboration. The external obstacles headmistresses face further underscore the multifaceted nature of their leadership roles. Gender biases, deeply embedded within societal structures, emerge prominently (see Table 2). The alignment with the observations of [19] is evident, emphasizing the juxtaposition of traditional gender roles with the authoritative demands of leadership. Such biases not only challenge their legitimacy but also cast a prolonged shadow on their efficacy (see Theme 2).

The desire and drive of headmistresses' coping mechanisms and resilience to the continuous demands of their offices give them

the urge to cope with both internal and external pressures that come their way in their day-to-day routines (see Themes 1 and 2). It is fascinating to note how these mechanisms contribute to the evolving identity of study participants as revealed by study results (see Fig. 3). Desire for drive, as emphasized by the headmistresses, aligns with [20] broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, suggesting that maintaining a positive outlook expands cognitive, emotional, and social resources. By focusing on constructive feedback and dismissing the negative, they bolster their resilience and mental fortitude. Moreover, Seeking Support sheds light on the collaborative nature of leadership identity construction. As [21] articulated, learning is a social process, and seeking guidance from experienced peers not only expands one's leadership toolkit but also enhances self-efficacy. Again, headmistresses' personal reflection is congruent with [22] reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, emphasizing that identity is continually moulded and established through introspective practices. The study finding is consistent with earlier studies by [22], [1], [3].

Given these challenges discovered by this study (see Themes 1 and 2), the exploration into headmistresses' coping mechanisms offers insightful revelations. Ignoring negativity, for instance, emerges as a prominent adaptive strategy. This mirrors the work of [23], who posited that effective leaders in challenging contexts often develop selective attention, honing in on constructive criticism and sidelining unfounded negativity. Again, seeking support underscores the collaborative nature of their leadership journey. This resonates with the research by [24], which highlighted the indispensable role of mentorship and peer support in leadership trajectories, especially for women in patriarchal settings. By leveraging collective wisdom, they not only fortify their decisions but also create a sustainable support network. Moreover, personal reflection emerges as a vital cornerstone. [25] have expounded on the significance of introspection in leadership, emphasizing that recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses facilitates a more adaptable and responsive leadership style, especially crucial in dynamic academic settings. Such experiences compel them to consistently validate their worth. Furthermore, the experiences of bias they encounter necessitate an added layer of resilience. As corroborated by [26], biases against female leaders often manifest as doubting their capabilities or diminishing their achievements.

Finally, the passion and character as role models and unflinching support and advice from these women in higher levels of academia to future female leaders provide a reflective lens into their leadership identity evolution (see Themes 3 and 4). continuous learning reiterates [27] growth mindset, emphasizing that identity is not static; it evolves through learning and experiences. Their emphasis on pursue passion resonates with [28] self-determination theory, suggesting that intrinsic motivation, rooted in passion, is central to the self-concept of leadership identity. Amidst their leadership roles, these headmistresses also emerged as strong advocates for women, championing broader societal transformation and inclusivity, in line with the insights from [29]. These findings of women serving as role models and influencers are in agreement with the work of [30] and [31].

Limitations

This study has some limitations regarding the participants, scope and data collection instruments. The study was limited to only senior high school headmistresses. The experiences of female headmistresses in the selected senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis could possibly influence their responses to the interviews and affect the

validity of the strength of the conclusion. Likewise, the study purposively selected 14 headmistresses in the Kumasi metropolis. The interview guide was a self-developed instrument based on previous literature and theories. That notwithstanding, the study employed several scientific scrutinise such as developing of interview guide with previous literature, pre-testing of tools, informed consent as well as methodological and interpretive rigour of analysing qualitative data [32]; [33].

Conclusion

In summation, the experiences of SHS headmistresses paint a vivid picture of leadership identity construction, emphasizing its dynamic, iterative, and multifaceted nature. It's a confluence of styles, coping mechanisms, communication, and personal philosophies, uniquely intertwining to shape leadership personas. Their narratives serve as an enlightening testament to the complexities of leadership identity, intricately blending theory with practice. While gender biases posed considerable challenges, the tenacity and resilience showcased by these women leaders are emblematic of broader shifts towards gender inclusivity in leadership roles. Their journey not only represents their personal triumphs but also serves as an inspiration for countless other women leaders navigating similar terrains.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

About the Author

Adu Gyamfua Kessie Agyekum holds a Master's degree in Educational Leadership and is serving as Head of Department of ICT of senior high school, Jamasi, Ashanti Ghana.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable

ORCID

Adu Gyamfua Kessie Agyekum/TJ2237

Data Availability Statement

All data supporting findings are available upon request.

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