



Breaking barriers: Professional growth of women leaders in Ghanaian public universities

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the professional growth of women leaders in two public universities in Ghana: the University of Mines and Technology and the University of Education, Winneba. A qualitative research approach, employing a case study design was adopted. Seven women leaders were purposively selected, and data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews. The data were analysed thematically, guided by the gender theory. The findings revealed that the women leaders shared comparable experiences across their respective fields. A combination of career advancement, professional development, and active participation in development networks and associations shaped their professional growth. Key factors that facilitated their success included mentorship and strong support systems. However, the women also encountered significant challenges, including difficulties in balancing family and work responsibilities, socio-cultural constraints, and persistent gender stereotypes and discrimination. The evidence suggests that although the women leaders have made significant progress in their careers, their advancement continues to be influenced by both supportive factors and systemic barriers. The study contributes to the limited literature on women's leadership in higher education in Ghana. It offers valuable insights into general leadership dynamics and the specific experiences of women leaders within the higher education sector. The findings provide a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by women leaders and suggest strategies including gender-responsive leadership selection processes, family-friendly institutional policies, and gender mainstreaming units to support women's advancement into senior administrative positions within Ghanaian Universities.

Keywords: Career Development, Higher Education, Ghana, Professional Growth, Women's Leadership

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) are expected to generate knowledge and innovations to address individual, societal, economic, and environmental challenges by developing curricula and pedagogical practices aimed at achieving these goals (Chaleta et al. 2021). As key agents of social transformation, universities in particular play a critical role in facilitating human capital and in the dissemination of enduring ideas (Nogueiro et al. 2022). O'Connor (2019) contends that although universities are often portrayed as gender-neutral meritocracies, they remain characterised by the centralisation of invisible male power. Historically, higher education has been dominated by social elites, predominantly men (Read & Kehm, 2016), and characterised by masculine ideals that are presented as gender-neutral standards (Holter & Snickare, 2022). Boateng (2018) confirms the long-standing tradition in which women who aspire to leadership roles in higher education face hostility, ridicule, and various forms of social sanctions, largely grounded in patriarchal norms.

Similarly, the underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership is a global phenomenon (Mata, 2019; Wang, 2025). Catalyst (2019) reports that globally, women hold an average of 29% of executive-level leadership positions while men remain disproportionately privileged in leadership roles. For instance, a gender analysis of three Ethiopian universities shows that among three presidents and twelve vice-president positions, none of the universities were led by a woman president, and only two women held vice-president roles. This profile highlights a pronounced gender inequality in top management and decision-making positions within the Ethiopian higher education system (Samela et al. 2017). There is also evidence that women constitute approximately 32% of professors in the United States, with slightly fewer, around 27%, achieving this rank in the European Union (O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021). In the United Kingdom, statistics from Advance HE show that although the proportion of female professors has increased by 50% since 2010, this remains largely in line with low levels observed in other countries (Advance HE, 2021). In Ghana, the University of Cape Coast made history in 2008 by appointing its first female Vice-Chancellor, followed in 2012 by the appointment of a female professor as the founding Vice-Chancellor of the



University of Energy and Natural Resources. Before these milestones, no woman had held the Chief Executive position in any Ghanaian University. Currently, only three of Ghana's 15 public Universities (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Ghana, Legon, and University of Health and Allied Sciences) are led by female Vice-Chancellors.

It is important to note that while progress has been made in advancing gender equality in education, women worldwide, particularly in contexts shaped by patriarchal norms, continue to face systemic barriers in accessing leadership positions within educational institutions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Although women are increasingly accessing leadership roles within educational institutions, their presence in top-tier positions remains disproportionately low (Gaus et al 2023b; CohenMiller et al. 2023). This underrepresentation is partly attributed to unequal distribution of family care responsibilities between men and women (Morgan et al. 2021), alongside enduring gender stereotypes that position women as nurturing and men as inherently suited to leadership, captured within the notion of 'think manager, think male' (Koenig et al., 2011). Moreover, institutional cultures within higher education further reinforce these disparities. Masculinist norms and traditional work patterns continue to privilege male leadership trajectories while marginalising women (e.g. Burkinshaw et al. 2018). Consequently, women remain largely invisible in senior academic and administrative roles, despite decades of gender parity efforts (e.g. Franklin, 2021). The rise of managerialism has further intensified these challenges by legitimising male dominance in leadership and framing women as lacking the required attributes for such roles (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Indeed, this is paradoxical considering the role of universities as agents of social transformation and equality (Adu-Oppong et al., 2017).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Evidently, although some progress has been made globally, women's representation in higher education leadership still lags behind their overall participation in academia (Coleman, 2019; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Furthermore, existing research on women and leadership positions in higher education is heavily concentrated in Western contexts, with limited empirical evidence from Africa and other developing regions (e.g. Maheshwari, 2023; Mousa, 2021). Particularly in Ghana, the scarcity of context-specific data constrains efforts to fully understand the unique challenges and experiences of women in higher education leadership. This study, therefore, fills this important scholarly gap by contributing to the limited literature on women's leadership in higher education in Ghana. It offers valuable insights into general leadership dynamics and the specific experiences of women leaders within the higher education sector. The study also suggests strategies for higher education management to mitigate gender disparities in leadership within Ghanaian Universities.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. to explore the experiences of the selected women leaders in relation to their professional development
- ii. to examine the challenges faced by the selected women leaders relative to their career advancement in the two higher educational institutions

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study adopts gender theory as the guiding framework. D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) conceptualise gender as a construct traditionally framed within binary categories (man and woman, masculine and feminine) and describe it as one of the most pervasive systems of classification globally. Some proponents argue that conceptualisations rooted in reproductive biology should be distinct from those shaped by social processes, designating the latter as 'gender' (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022). This distinction has led to widespread recognition of a conceptual divide between biological sex (being male or female) and gender (which reflects an achieved identity expressed as masculine or feminine, or as a man or a woman). From this perspective, Voronina (2002) categorises gender theory into three main perspectives: gender as a social construction, gender as a form of stratification, and gender as a cultural metaphor. The social construction perspective views gender as an organised system of social relations between women and men, shaped by key societal institutions (Voronina, 2002). This perspective rests on the assumption that gender is produced through social processes, gender roles and behaviours (West & Zimmerman, 2009), and these differ across cultures and evolve (World Health Organisation, 2021).

In this study, gender is conceptualised as a social construction and a form of stratification to analyse the experiences of the women leaders. O'Connor (2019) argues that organisations can be understood as gendered in their structures, cultures and processes at both formal and informal levels. Similarly, Yoder (2001) posits that "leadership is a process that occurs within a social context that is gendered" (p. 815), which means that leadership occurs in a series of contexts (social, political, organisational, and cultural), where gender meanings and practices are deeply embedded



even as they vary situationally over time. Furthermore, Heijsta et al. (2017) highlight substantial evidence of gender bias against women in organisations. At the structural level, this includes gendered career paths that effectively disadvantage women. Within organisational settings, power and leadership are often associated with hegemonic masculinity and male stereotypes (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2018).

2.2 Empirical Review

In higher education, educational leaders, such as Heads of Department and Deans, are viewed as individuals who generate and disseminate knowledge, while also leveraging social capital and networks to support these processes (Cheng & Zhu 2021). Research shows that career advancement in terms of promotion to such higher levels is a complex, multi-layered process (Taser-Erdogan, 2022). As a result, many women academics exit the leadership pipeline at the middle management stage as they struggle to balance the demands of leadership roles with other responsibilities (Qadhi et al. 2023). Research also shows persistent gender segregation in university management, where women face greater career progression barriers and experience gender tokenism despite reforms in human resource practices. For instance, in the Southern African context, Mbakanma and Strydom (2022) found that women's progression in academia is hindered by unfair recruitment practices, limited mentorship opportunities, workplace harassment, the absence of informal support networks, low self-esteem, and entrenched patriarchal attitudes.

Studies have examined women's leadership roles in academic institutions (e.g. Abalkhail, 2019; Kataeva (2022; Redmond et al., 2017). For instance, Kataeva (2022) found that under-representation of female faculty in STEM in post-Soviet Tajikistan is shaped by work-life balance challenges, traditional gender stereotypes about 'masculine' and 'feminine' professions, and gendered organisational cultures (Acker, 2012; Hart, 2016). Women reported limited access to international education, exclusion from networks, lack of recognition, and restricted access to opportunities, including competitions and awards. Despite encouragement from some mentors and colleagues, these barriers slowed women's academic progression. Broader evidence shows that gender segregation in STEM education leads to continued segregation in STEM careers and limited female representation in technology and engineering fields (Goy et al., 2018). Tessens et al (2011) also explored leadership development needs of senior women in two Australian universities. Drawing on qualitative data, the findings highlighted the need for dedicated leadership development programmes covering people management, political, personal, and operational skills, as well as career development through mentoring, coaching, networking, and 360-degree feedback. The findings also revealed gender disparities in support and resources, with men in senior roles receiving more recognition and administrative assistance. Senior women at both universities reported experiencing discrimination and double standards, and recommended increased administrative support, greater representation in leadership and committee roles, and improved flexible working arrangements to enhance advancement. On the other hand, Abalkhail (2019) found that despite the growing number of female faculty in senior academic leadership in Saudi Arabia, women continue to face barriers linked to patriarchal ideology, gender-role expectations, religious and cultural norms, and limited organisational support.

While some argue that women lack ambition for leadership, evidence suggests that many capable women do aspire to senior roles but are constrained by persistent structural and cultural barriers (Hannum et al. 2015). These constraints are often described as a 'glass ceiling' that limits women's upward mobility in academia. Moreover, research consistently shows that barriers to women's advancement into senior academic leadership roles extend beyond the 'glass ceiling' and include gender discrimination, old boys' networks, stereotyping, socio-cultural norms, absence of supportive policies and personal constraints (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Gandhi & Sen, 2021). Coetzee and Moosa (2020) further introduced the 'glass cliff' phenomenon, where women are more likely to be appointed to precarious leadership positions, often requiring them to perform under higher pressure than their male counterparts. In Ghana, women in academia face similar leadership barriers. Many report sacrificing family, leisure, and social life due to job demands, with added stress and limited time for personal well-being (Adu-Oppong et al. 2017). Leadership progression also intensifies these pressures, affecting women's decisions and re-entry into work (Adapa et al., 2016). Anderson et al. (2023) further found that women in Ghanaian universities struggle to balance domestic and professional responsibilities more than men, although resilience and religiosity help them cope.

Crucially, research on women's leadership in higher education highlights key factors that contribute to success. Organisational and structured leadership development, both formal and informal, are identified as critical strategies for building leadership capacity (Chrisholm-Burns et al. 2017; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Research further identifies professional expertise as a key driver of career advancement (Dahlvig & Longman, 2021). Additionally, mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship play significant roles in women's leadership success, particularly through psychosocial support (Longman et al., 2019). This aligns with evidence that women often receive more psychosocial mentoring, while men tend to benefit more from career-focused mentoring relationships (Chang et al., 2014; Ibarra, 2015). In Kenya, a study by Kipkosgei (2021), which purposively sampled eighteen women leaders from eleven Kenyan public universities, found that the women leaders attributed their success to personal qualities such as ambition, resilience, patience, and a deliberate mindset shift that positioned them for leadership roles. The findings,

however, revealed that despite the qualifications and achievements of the women, structural barriers beyond merit continued to impede their progression in the higher education environment. Evidence from Nigeria also suggests that, although women academics contribute significantly through teaching, research, community service, and leadership. Overall, the discussions so far highlight that despite equality policies and legislative reforms, universities progression into senior leadership roles continues to be constrained by factors including cultural and religious norms (Ogunode et al., 2023) remain deeply gendered institutions where masculine norms dominate leadership pathways, resulting in the continued underrepresentation of women in senior academic roles. The literature also emphasises education, continuous development, institutional training, and supportive mentoring relationships as central to women's leadership success in academia.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study sought to examine the experiences of women leaders at the University of Mines and Technology (UMaT) and the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). A qualitative approach was employed for a detailed understanding of the psychological, cultural, and institutional factors shaping the female leaders' experiences. In line with this approach, a case study design was adopted for in-depth investigation of the contemporary phenomenon of women leadership within the context of the two universities (Yin, 2018). According to Yin (2018), qualitative case studies enable the development of rich representations of participants' lived experiences.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted at two public universities in Ghana: UMaT and UEW. UMaT, established in 2004, is a public university with five (5) faculties, two (2) schools, and more than thirteen (13) departments, supported by units such as the Office of Research Innovation and Consultancy, Planning and Quality Assurance, and an International Programme Centre (www.umat.edu.gh). Also, a public University established in 2004, UEW has a special mandate to train teachers for all levels of education in Ghana. It comprises several institutes, schools, faculties, and over thirty departments offering more than 250 undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. (www.uew.edu.gh). Research indicates that, since their establishment, neither UMaT nor UEW has had a female Vice-Chancellor (Anderson et al. 2023). As of the time of this study, no woman had also occupied the positions of Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Registrar or Finance Officer in either University. The persistent underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of University leadership is noteworthy, given that both institutions have established gender mainstreaming policies and directorates intended to advance gender equity and inclusion.

3.3 Sampling and sample size

Seven participants were purposively selected for the study: four (4) women leaders from UEW and three (3) women leaders from UMaT. The decision to purposively select seven participants is consistent with similar studies exploring women leaders' experiences and characteristics in higher education settings (Redmond et al., 2017). Participants were selected based on specific criteria, including being women in academic leadership positions, having worked in their respective institutions within the past ten years, and having served in leadership roles for at least five (5) years. These roles included positions such as Dean (Professional level) or Head of Department (senior lecturer) (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Also, during the data collection period, only four women occupied senior leadership positions at UMaT (three with STEM backgrounds and one with qualifications in language and communication). The UMaT sample reflects the three STEM women leaders. At the UEW, seven women leaders met the inclusion criteria at the time of the study; however, only four were ultimately interviewed. The remaining three potential participants could not be interviewed due to scheduling constraints arising from official engagements and travel commitments. Table 1 provides details on the selected women leaders.

Table 1

Characteristics of Women Leaders

Participant	Institution	Highest Qualification	Years in the University
UMaT-P1	Mines and Technology	PhD	15 years
UMaT-P2	Mines and Technology	PhD	18 years
UMaT-P3	Mines and Technology	PhD	19 years
UEW-P4	Education and Liberal Arts	PhD	12 years
UEW-P5	Education and Liberal Arts	MPhil	16 years
UEW-P6	Education and Liberal Arts	PhD	20 years
UEW-P7	Education and Liberal Arts	PhD	12 years



3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was via in-depth interviews to allow the women leaders to openly share their experiences and perspectives on their journeys to senior leadership, factors that shaped their appointment to their current positions, and challenges encountered in their leadership roles (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in participants' natural work environments, specifically in their respective offices (Adhabi, & Anozie, 2017). All seven participants provided oral consent before the interviews, given the small number of women occupying senior leadership positions and the need to safeguard their identities (Lamba, 2023). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers to familiarise themselves with the data. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. To safeguard participants' information, interview transcripts and related research materials were stored securely and were accessible only to the researchers.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using a combination of Patton's (2015) three-step qualitative data analysis process alongside Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Following Patton's (2015) approach, the analysis involved gathering the data, organising them in a manageable form, and presenting a meaningful interpretation of the findings. Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach also involved familiarisation with the data, systematic coding and the development and refinement of themes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participants were assured that their privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity would be strictly maintained throughout the study. To protect participants' identities, alphanumeric codes such as UMaT-P1 and UEW-P4 were used in place of real names. In addition, given the relatively small number of women in senior leadership positions, specific job titles, faculties, and departmental affiliations are deliberately omitted to further minimise the risk of identification (Thomson et al. 2022). To ensure reflexivity, the researchers critically reflected on their positionality throughout the research process and adopted a reflexive approach in addressing emerging ethical considerations (Lamba, 2023). As women researchers working within higher education, we recognised that our gender, professional experiences and interest in women's leadership could shape interactions with the participants and the interpretation of data. We maintained reflexive notes throughout the study and grounded our analysis primarily on participants' accounts.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Women leaders' experiences and professional growth

Two key themes emerged from the data on the 'women leaders' experiences and professional growth' in the two higher educational institutions: Education and career advancement, and support systems.

4.1.1 Education and Career Advancement

The findings revealed that nearly all the women leaders (six out of the seven) had obtained doctoral degrees, with the remaining participant actively pursuing the PhD degree. Thus, six participants already held PhDs, and one held an MPhil while working toward the doctoral degree. The women leaders exhibited strong commitment to professional and personal development despite persistent patriarchal cultures that hinder women's career progression. Notably, the women received sponsorships and scholarships to further their education. One participant explained that although she was initially employed with a Master's degree, obtaining a PhD became necessary for career progression, requiring her to combine teaching with doctoral studies:

There was a need to obtain a PhD. I was employed with a Master's degree, but I realised that without a PhD I could not progress, therefore I had to combine teaching and pursuing my PhD at the same time (UMaT-P2, 11/08/21, UMaT Campus)).

Similarly, UEW-P4 explained that she began her PhD at UEW as one of the pioneers of the programme; UMaT-P1 and UMaT-P3 reported receiving institutional support to pursue PhD studies locally and abroad, respectively; while UEW-P6 also intimated the University supported her doctoral studies, noting she was close to completion. Participants recognised that higher education was vital for their advancement and that education strengthened leadership capacity and adaptability. Their academic achievements align with findings from Morgan et al. (2021) study, which emphasised that women often work harder by gaining more experiences and higher qualifications to level the playing field. Within this context, higher education was viewed as critical for gaining influence and securing leadership roles (Westoby et al., 2021). Again, their experiences of strong institutional support contrast claims that women often lack educational support (Goy et al., 2018), and reflect broader trends showing



increasing numbers of women obtaining advanced degrees and becoming more competitive for leadership roles (e.g. Coleman, 2019; Chaleta et al., 2021).

Also, the women leaders showed increased awareness of the processes required to access leadership positions. The findings show that the participants were well informed about promotion criteria as they advanced in their careers; the fact that research productivity was a key factor in selecting university leaders which required them to prioritise scholarship alongside administrative skill development. As UMaT-P3 explained:

“You know when it comes to academia, there are standards for promotion...and those requirements are the same for our male counterparts” (UMaT-P3, 12/08/21, UMaT Campus).

On the other hand, UEW-P7 also pointed out that as a senior lecturer, she consciously strives to publish more and is actively working towards her next promotion. The data highlighted the women academics’ resilience, drive, religious faith, and desire to excel beyond domestic responsibilities as key enablers of advancement, as well as the stamina required to cope with academic pressures. UEW-P4 emphasised determination, hard work, commitment, and ambition, and the importance of such personal attributes in her career progression. Below were some of the responses from the data:

It is the attributes of self-determination and perseverance that have brought me this far. I was determined to achieve career success, without overly depending on a ‘man,’ and I trusted in God...so the secret lies in determination and perseverance (UMaT-P1, 09/08/21, UMaT Campus)

Hard work, determination, and my faith. I am a woman of faith, I have a firm belief in God... (UMaT-P3, 12/08/21, UMaT Campus)

Determination to work...These days, we don’t talk about spirituality, but I am also a Christian who believes in God... (UEW-P5, 02/09/21, UEW Campus)

Even though the participants suggested that promotion criteria in both institutions were equal for both men and women, reflecting gender-neutral policies and procedures, gender perspectives argue that equality in rules may not necessarily translate into equal outcomes. For instance, gendered institutional theory contends that organisations may appear neutral while embedding practices and procedures that may advantage one gender over another (Acker, 2012; Hart, 2016). In the context of this study, publication output may be influenced by gendered realities. The women leaders face greater gender-role expectations, which may affect their ability to meet standards at the same rate as their male counterparts.

Also, from the extracts above, the women leaders generally exercised agency, empowerment, and resistance to traditional gender norms. From gender theory perspectives, the participants’ emphasis on self-determination and perseverance reflects the belief that women can achieve leadership positions through their own efforts and commitment, challenging traditional gender norms that position women as dependent on male support (Ibarra, 2015). Thus, women can compete and succeed in professional environments without ‘overly depending on a man’ when they have the opportunities to do so. Chance (2022) observed that personal resilience and strength are defining traits of ‘superwomen’ who navigate and overcome challenges such as racism, sexism, and ageism to attain leadership roles in academia. He further argues that overcoming these barriers not only supports individual success but also builds essential leadership capacities for the future. In line with this, the women leaders affirmed that self-belief, resilience, and faith are critical for surviving and thriving in a competitive academic environment, supporting findings of Fazal et al. (2019). In line with the findings, research (e.g. Chan & Di, 2024) has pointed out how religious faith and spiritual grounding serve as coping and sense-making strategies in leadership experiences. Particularly, women leaders in African contexts leverage faith as a resource to navigate complex leadership encounters and patriarchal organisational structures (Anderson et al. 2023; Samela et al., 2017).

The women leaders further demonstrated strong leadership qualities. Participants identified key leadership qualities as communicativeness, reliability, motivational ability, and the capacity to inspire and support subordinates. The data depicted the women academic leaders as possessing expressive traits such as enthusiasm, ambition, sincerity, sensitivity, compassion, self-control, and self-sacrifice. In addition, it was put across that effective leadership required strong interpersonal relations, conflict management, and collaborative skills. The literature, however, suggests that leadership is often socially constructed as masculine, associated with traits such as strength, aggression, and competitiveness, thereby reinforcing perspectives that exclude women from leadership roles (Yousaf & Schmeide, 2017). On the contrary, the findings show that the women leaders have successfully broken traditional constraints that limit their career advancement, moving beyond the long-standing gender divide in academic leadership.

On the other hand, the findings demonstrated that the women leaders actively participated in professional associations and developmental networks that contributed to their leadership and career advancement. In addition to traditional performance metrics such as publications and research output, social networks played a significant role in enabling the academics to attain senior leadership roles, as they provide valuable social capital that supports career progression. Such networks offered professional contacts as well as emotional and career development support. UMaT-P2 stated:



I have a membership in many associations. I am keen about the women's networks and associations...we are highly focused and driven when it comes to progress...we all do well to encourage one another (UMaT-P2, 11/08/21, UMaT Campus).

UEW-P7 also indicated that *"She is a member of an association that has contributed to her career and professional progression; through the association, she meets and networks with other professionals in her specialisation* (UEW-P7, 06/09/21, UEW Campus). On her part, UMaT P-1 narrated that: *"She is a member of a professional women's association and once a month, the association meets to have seminars, talks, and other activities to encourage one another"* (UMaT-P1, 09/08/21, UMaT Campus).

There is evidence that networks are important in addressing gender imbalances in professional settings, as they create opportunities for women to challenge male dominance by gaining support for gender-responsive ideas and initiatives (Nogueiro et al., 2022). They also help women navigate cultural norms and complex institutional practices that influence their participation in higher education leadership (Gaus et al 2023b). For instance, Adom (2017) and Hannum et al. (2015) argue that networking enhances career advancement and accelerates access to leadership positions. Similarly, Dahlvig and Longman (2021) suggest that developmental networks serve as an important strategy for helping women overcome the 'glass ceiling' in organisational leadership.

4.1.2 Support Systems

The analysis further showed strong support systems as significant factors in the professional development of the women leaders, including mentorship support and support from partners, family members, and colleagues. The data revealed that the mentors provided the women with valuable guidance on understanding institutional culture, navigating university systems, and balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. Both formal and informal approaches to mentorship were inherent in the data as seen in the following:

"My mentor was there for me and his guidance and advice, both formal and informal, have helped me to rise to the pinnacle of my career" (UMaT-P3, 12/08/21, UMaT Campus)

The mentorship was structured and formal, this was for newly appointed academic staff... mentees were assigned to Professors... (UEW-P4, 01/09/21, UEW Campus).

UMaT-P3 described receiving guidance from a senior professor after a failed publication attempt, highlighting how spontaneous mentoring relationships can provide lasting professional learning:

"After rejection of my first publication, it was a professor who held my hands and took me through the processes...through that I learned the art and it has stayed with me till now" (UMaT-P3, 12/08/21, UMaT Campus).

UEW-P7 also reiterated that she regularly seeks counsel and support from experienced colleagues and superiors, both males and females, whom she considers as her mentors, when she faces a challenge as a woman leader. In addition, participants reported gender-specific mentoring through institutional structures. UEW-P4 and UEW-P7 gave instances of programmes that provided targeted support for women. The analysis further showed that the women leaders also actively served as mentors to other female academics through one-on-one mentoring relationships. UEW- P5 stated:

I am a mentor to some women in this university, and I always avail myself and get involved in gender-specific programmes, because I have also benefited from such programmes (UEW-P5, 02/09/21, UEW Campus)

According to Allen et al. (2021), female leaders serve as role models and significantly contribute to the advancement of their peers through mentoring programmes that help women academics realise their potential. UMaT-P1 noted that, as a woman leader in STEM, female early-career academics look up to her, and she encourages and inspires them to climb higher in their academic pursuits. Although Azevedo et al. (2023) found that mentorship is often gendered and unevenly accessed due to toxic workplace environments, the findings indicate that the women leaders in this study did receive mentoring support in their careers. The findings are consistent with ideas by Boateng et al. (2021), that same-gender mentoring is often preferred due to shared understanding of gender-specific challenges. Gandhi and Sen (2020) similarly observes that female mentors are often more approachable and provide strong emotional and professional support.

The data also established that the women leaders received support from their partners, family members and colleagues. Particularly, family support came out strongly as a key enabling factor for leadership. This is reflected in UEW-P4's statement:

I have a husband who is supportive; he is interested in academia, so we have a lot in common, and he is the understanding type. He has been supporting me with some of the things that I have to do at home, so I have a strong support system (UEW-P4, 01/09/21, UEW Campus).



Another participant said her husband was very supportive when she was pursuing her PhD programme in a foreign country; he was ready to take care of their children and manage their home in her absence. UMaT-P2 also commented:

I normally have a domestic help to assist me in taking care of my children and home and when the domestic help is unavailable, I call on my family members to assist me. I remember one time my sister had to come in to assist because I had an examination... (UMaT-P2, 11/08/21, UMaT Campus).

Although gender theory explains that men and women are stratified through hierarchical social relations that shape their roles (Voronina, 2002), the evidence suggests that the women leaders benefited from support provided by their spouses and male partners. As Read and Kehm (2016) highlights, spousal support helps women sustain motivation and effectiveness in their professional roles, while its absence may contribute to stress, anxiety and burnout, potentially affecting continued academic and professional development. In general, the findings above highlight the importance of social and relational support for women in navigating career environments. Gender theory perspectives recognise that women's leadership journeys are not only shaped by individual capabilities, but also by social networks and support structures available to them (Taser-Erdogan, 2022). The data suggest that due to disproportional domestic roles assigned to women as a result of societal expectations, supportive partners and family members can help reduce these burdens, enabling women to devote more time and energy to professional growth and leadership responsibilities.

Research further confirms that women adopt various strategies to balance work and family life, including spousal and parental support, hiring child care assistance, and carefully managing time between domestic and professional responsibilities (Chinchilla et al. 2006). Similarly, Qadhi et al. (2023) note that women rely on past experiences and family support to manage leadership and life demands. Although some studies report limited family support (e.g. Gandhi & Sen, 2020), the findings indicate strong support from multiple sources. For instance, UMaT-P3 reported receiving support from family, church and colleagues, highlighting resilience and religiosity as important coping strategies that help women leaders manage workplace challenges and remain effective (Anderson et al. 2023).

4.2 Challenges experienced by the women leaders

Challenges faced by the women leaders in their career advancement were categorised into two broad themes: work-life conflict and socio-cultural barriers.

4.2.1 Work-Life Conflict

The results indicated that the women leaders experienced challenges with work-family balance in their academic careers. All the women noted that balancing domestic and professional responsibilities often limited their work performance. The findings further show that the female scholars often devoted more time to childcare and household responsibilities, which often limited their time for research and other academic activities.

UMaT-P2, for instance, reflected that given the timing of her appointment, she would likely have attained full professorship if not for family and other responsibilities. She further explained that she had to pursue her doctoral studies locally to manage childcare and eldercare responsibilities, while also balancing academic and household duties.

"Sometimes you find yourself either going for 'weighing' or antenatal clinic and missing out on academic programmes or rescheduling work activities. I had three children within four years and so for a while, I was seriously battling between motherhood and work" (UMaT-P2, 11/08/21, UMaT Campus). There was also a similar response from UEW P-6:

There are responsibilities aside academic responsibilities. There are both nuclear and extended family responsibilities. You have your social responsibilities and in the University system, you have responsibilities that are demanding. In your family, you are a mother, a wife, and a homemaker...I combine all these, which puts a lot of demand on me (UEW-P6, 03/09/21, UEW Campus).

In tandem with gender theory, the women leaders were still expected to maintain primary family responsibilities. Amakye et al. (2021) observes that although both men and women experience work-life conflict, women are disproportionately affected in academia due to persistent influence of gender roles, patriarchy, and gendered institutions on women's leadership experience. The women leaders' accounts of struggling to balance domestic and professional responsibilities illustrate how societal expectations continue to assign women household management and family-related duties even when they occupy demanding leadership positions. Due to this work-life conflict, some women in higher education avoid leadership roles due to perceived heavy domestic burden and limited flexibility, leading them to opt out of various opportunities (Qadhi et al., 2023; Tessens et al., 2011).

Generally, the women leaders were of the view that life events such as marriage, childbirth, and even biological cycles can slow women's career progression, reinforcing how gendered family responsibilities can disadvantage women in academia. Unlike their male counterparts, whose careers are less affected by caregiving roles,



women experience gendered expectations that intensify these challenges (Westoby et al. 2021). This dual responsibility of women can negatively affect their well-being, increasing stress, anxiety, fatigue, and other health challenges (Fazal et al. 2019).

4.2.2 Socio-cultural impediments

The leaders generally indicated that traditional norms discouraged women's educational advancement.

UMaT2, for example, *described how she was the first woman in her family to pursue higher education and faced pressure to marry instead of continuing her studies. A participant also recounted opposition from her father, who believed teacher training was sufficient for women, highlighting how cultural expectations can limit women's educational aspirations: "...When I wanted to pursue a degree, my father told me, as for a woman, teacher training college is enough...I started trading to get money to see myself through school before I could get a degree"* (UMaT-P1, 09/08/21, UMaT Campus).

Another participant also reported marital resistance to her academic advancement, which ultimately affected her marriage, illustrating the personal cost of challenging gender norms. Within the context of gender theory, the father's assertion that *'teacher training college is enough'* for a woman reflects a patriarchal belief that women do not require advanced education to fulfil their expected societal roles (Boateng et al., 2021). Such assumptions often limit women's access to higher education and reinforce gender inequalities in career advancement and leadership opportunities. In patriarchal contexts like Ghana, cultural norms position men as providers and women as homemakers, and these reinforce gender discrimination in professional development (e.g. Darko & Seidu, 2016). Such male-dominated structures also undermine women's confidence and leadership capacity and are often biased against highly educated women (Ghosh & Barber, 2021).

The study also uncovered how the women leaders experienced gender stereotypes and discrimination. According to the data, gender stereotypical beliefs culminated in unequal treatments, underrepresentation of women in leadership in academic spaces, inadequate facilities for women and reduced inclusion. Participants in both institutions lamented the uneven distribution of women and men across the academic strata, with men dominating senior leadership positions even when women are equally qualified. UEW-P5 asserted:

When women are concerned... if you are not lucky to get people who believe in your dream and vision, who would want to be part of what you are pushing, the agenda you are pushing, you would have problems and that is where women have challenges when they become leaders... and that is why sometimes people say when women are in positions they become tyrants, not that they are tyrants but they see that the support is not there, so you need to force issues, you need to push people, you need to be hard sometimes to get things done (UEW-P6, 03/09/21, UEW Campus).

The data suggested that limited support often forced women to adopt stricter leadership styles to achieve results, reflecting how a lack of backing can shape perceptions of women as 'tyrannical' leaders. For instance, UEW-P4 also noted that women leaders are often perceived as overly strict in male-dominated academic environments and may even lack support from other women, making leadership particularly challenging:

Generally, people think when women lead they are strict...but you have to get things done...when a female is the Head, so many things are associated with her, she is like this or like that, and sometimes your own female colleagues would not support you" (UEW-P4, 01/09/21, UEW Campus).

UEW-P4 further described other experiences of professional rivalry and lack of solidarity among female colleagues, suggesting that women may sometimes face resistance from other women in competitive academic environments: *"Your own colleagues will ride you down, yeah colleagues...men hardly do that..."*. Research also shows that subordinates may respond even more positively to instructions from male leaders than female leaders (Amakye et al 2021), reflecting entrenched gender bias. Women leaders, therefore face a 'double bind' where assertive behaviour is criticised, while more relational styles are also undervalued. From the data, the women leaders faced contradictory expectations that are not often applied to men in similar positions. For instance, the statement that *"people think when women lead they are strict...but you have to get things done"* reveals the tensions between leadership effectiveness and gender expectations" UEW-P4, 01/09/21, UEW Campus).

The leadership roles make it imperative for the women to make decisions, enforce policies and hold others accountable. However, when women display these behaviours, they are often perceived as extensively harsh or authoritarian because such behaviours conflict with traditional feminine norms that associate women with warmth, care and accommodation (Ofori-Birikorang et al. 2025; Westoby et al. 2021). Women leaders may therefore be criticised for performing duties expected of their positions. Despite global and local efforts to promote gender equality and gender equity, the findings suggest that workplace discrimination and limited support remain persistent challenges.



V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study explored the experiences of women leaders in two public universities, focusing on their career development, leadership experiences and challenges. Case study design was used, with data collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Drawing on gender theory, findings show that the women leaders were highly committed to career advancement, often pursuing advanced degrees and extensive experiences to remain competitive. Participation in professional networks and associations emerged as key supporting factors in career progression. Personal qualities such as resilience, commitment, strong interpersonal relationships, research productivity, and faith were also identified as important leadership drivers. Participants, however experienced gender stereotypes and work-life balance challenges. It was uncovered that family support and partner support proved essential in managing these demands. Mentorship was another critical enabler: both male and female mentors supported participants' advancements, while institutional initiatives like workshops and formal mentoring programmes strengthened their professional development. In turn, the participants now actively mentor others, particularly women, recognising mentorship and networking as vital to women's leadership success. Overall, the findings suggest that women remain underrepresented in academia and leadership due to embedded institutional, cultural and social structures. The study contributes to the limited literature on women leadership in higher education in Ghana. It offers valuable insights into general leadership dynamics, and the specific experiences of women leaders within the higher education sector. A key limitation of the study is its small sample of seven women leaders from two public universities. While the participants provided rich and valuable insights into women's leadership experiences, the limited number may have constrained the range of perspectives captured. Consequently, the findings are context-specific and not statistically generalisable to all women leaders in higher education. For future research, a comparative study can be conducted between women leaders in public and private universities to explore possible differences in their experiences. Another useful direction would be a comparative study of male and female leaders in public universities to identify similarities and differences in leadership experiences. Further research could also examine institutional policies on inclusive leadership in public universities, particularly regarding the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions. Additionally, comparative studies involving women leaders across STEM-oriented and non-STEM-oriented universities may also provide deeper insights into how institutional context shapes career progression of women in higher education.

5.2 Recommendations

The study has implications for gender discourses, policy and practice in higher education. Insights from the findings point to the need for universities to introduce structured leadership and professional development programmes specifically designed for women faculty and leaders. Such programmes should focus on building competencies in team leadership, supervision, interpersonal communication, and strategic planning, while also creating a supportive environment that encourages the promotion of women into senior roles. Other policy and practical recommendations include gender-responsive leadership selection processes, implementing family-friendly institutional policies, and strengthening gender mainstreaming units to support women's advancement into senior administrative positions.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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