



Factors that motivate female students to seek leadership positions in universities in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the factors influencing female students to pursue leadership positions in selected universities in Ghana. A qualitative research approach grounded in a phenomenological design was adopted for the study. Purposive sampling was used to select eighteen participants from four public universities in Ghana. Resilience Theory and Social Identity Theory provided the theoretical foundation for the study. Data were collected through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interview guide, while thematic analysis was used to interpret the primary data gathered. The findings revealed that while some participants perceived societal expectations as confining women to specific “feminine” roles, others regarded their gender as a source of motivation to challenge prevailing stereotypes and actively pursue leadership positions. The study further showed that internal factors, including the desire for self-improvement and personal ambition, motivate strongly female students to aspire to leadership positions at the University. In addition, early exposure to leadership opportunities through mentors and teachers emerged as an important source of inspiration for female student leaders. It therefore recommends that mentors, parents and teachers, should deliberately support female students identify and enhance their leadership capacity from an early age. These supportive measures can equip young women with essential leadership competencies, enabling them to overcome challenges while fostering self-confidence and strengthening their leadership identity. The study also recommends that universities in collaboration with Student Representative Council (SRC) and National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) should promote purpose-driven leadership training to encourage female students to view leadership as a tool for transformation.

Keywords: Female Students, Leadership, Leadership Development, Motivation, Universities

I. INTRODUCTION

Education has proven over time to be a foundation of growth and advancement in nations all over the world. Education has been acknowledged as one of the important tools that equip and mould future development of humans in any given society (Riski et al., 2021). This understanding has created momentum and global partnership in working towards gender equality in leadership worldwide (World Bank, 2021). With education opportunities expanding more each day, there is a growing realization that unleashing women’s full potential is not only the right thing to do for equity’s sake but is also a smart strategy for building inclusive governance and fostering development (Kabeer, 2016). There is proof that when women participate in leadership and decision-making, it leads to better performing institutions which allow for social inclusion and better development (World Bank, 2024; UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2024).

Across all societies, women play important roles not only as caregivers but also as visionaries, decision-makers and transformational leaders. Research consistently indicates that women have limited opportunities to take up leadership roles in higher education, leading to continuous efforts to better understand the barriers preventing them from attaining such positions and the strategies needed to address them (Bowen, 2024). The 21st century requires a new form of leadership that is equitable, inclusive and reflective of the diversity within societies. Educating women and inspiring them to pursue leadership positions therefore signifies a strategic pathway toward social advancement, equity and national development (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). According to the World Economic Forum [WEF], (2022), societies led by women are more inclined to implement policies that promote economic resilience, long-term peace and social inclusion.

Schools present a platform through which future leaders of nations are shaped. Female leadership in schools prepares girls into great leaders of their development. Female leadership in schools allow young girls to learn communication skills, civic responsibility as well as decision-making and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, the involvement of more females in leadership positions creates role models who encourage other women to develop the confidence needed to pursue leadership in academic institutions (Adu-Oppong & Arthur, 2015). Female student leaders are then equipped to lead change in their schools and the world. For these reasons, persons, organizations and countries



are making great efforts to see more women in positions where their voices, visions and values can shape the world (UN Women, 2022).

Higher Education Institutions serve as important platforms for nurturing leadership potentials of individuals in their career paths and the exposure of females to leadership roles while in school provides them with valuable opportunities to develop leadership competencies (UNESCO, 2020). Within the Ghanaian tertiary education context, the Student Representative Council (SRC) serves as the principal student governing body in many universities and other tertiary institutions. The SRC is recognised within the University's student affairs structure and provides a formal platform for student representation and participation in university affairs (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology [KNUST] SRC, 2026). Leadership positions within the SRC, particularly the office of President, have historically been dominated by male students. In recent years, however, some female students have challenged this trend by breaking the long-standing male dominance in student leadership across universities in Ghana. Institutions such as the University for Development Studies and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology have recently recorded their first female SRC Presidents (Anderson et al., 2024), representing significant progress in advancing women's participation in student leadership.

Despite the increasing emphasis on gender equality, leadership identity within Ghanaian universities continues to be perceived largely as male-dominated, even where equal opportunities exist for both genders. Although many female students do not contest student leadership positions, a few continue to rise through the leadership ranks despite the numerous challenges they encounter (Anderson, 2025). This study therefore examined the factors that motivate female students to aspire to leadership positions in selected universities in Ghana in the midst of challenges.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the increased participation of women in higher education globally and nationally, their representation in student leadership positions within universities remains low (Anderson et al., 2024). Universities are heralded spaces for preparing future leaders where students can gain political experience and leadership skills required for civic engagement (Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2015). Over the years women have increasingly enrolled in universities compared to previous decades; however, few women contest for student leadership positions including positions on Student Representative Councils (SRCs). The limited number of women contesting for leadership positions at universities calls for an inquiry into what factors influence the small percentage of women interested in student leadership roles (Downey et al., 2024). Pertaining to women in higher education leadership, universities have incorporated leadership programmes, mentoring as well as gender policies to promote leadership among women. Yet, studies show that women in universities continue to be hindered by structural and socio-cultural factors from participating in leadership roles (Thien et al., 2025). Therefore, little is known about what motivates women who decide to contest for leadership positions, specifically in African and Ghanaian universities' contexts (Lee & Chan, 2023).

In Ghana, although recent milestones such as the election of female Student Representative Council presidents at the University for Development Studies and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology signal progress toward gender inclusion in student governance, women's participation in student leadership remains relatively low compared to their male counterparts (Anderson et al., 2024). Existing scholarly works in Ghana have predominantly focused on barriers impeding women from seeking leadership positions, with limited attention devoted to understanding the motivational factors that inspire women to contest leadership positions despite these obstacles (Adu-Oppong & Arthur, 2015; Thien et al., 2025). This gap in knowledge limits the ability of universities and policymakers to design effective interventions, mentorship programmes and institutional support mechanisms that can enhance women's participation in student leadership and contribute to the development of future women leaders. Therefore, there is a need to examine the factors motivating women student leaders in universities to contest for leadership positions within the Ghanaian tertiary university context.

1.2 Research Question

What factors motivate female student leaders to seek leadership positions in selected universities in Ghana?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Social Identity Theory

The Social Identity Theory underpinned this study. The concept of social identity was introduced by Tajfel (1972) and later expanded by Hogg (2001) to explain how individuals understand themselves within group contexts and how social categorization shapes one's place in society. In the context of the present study, female student leaders' self-categorization within leadership groups influences their confidence, self-concept and behaviour. By applying the theory in the present study, it can be inferred that many female student leaders need support in overcoming confidence gaps

and developing a strong leadership identity (Fuselier & Beatty, 2023; Kay & Shipman, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to Madsen and Longman (2020), leadership identity develops through commitment to leadership roles and a sense of purpose. How individuals perceive themselves as leaders shape their decision-making, understanding of their roles and the extent to which followers accept their authority (Tubin, 2017). Bolton (2014) argues that leaders often define themselves through the roles they occupy and derive satisfaction from belonging to particular social groups.

In the context of the present study, social identity extends beyond female students' membership in university leadership bodies to include motivation, emotional attachment and a sense of belonging within the student body (Brown, 2009; Mayanja, 2018). Female student leaders' perceptions of themselves as women and leaders influence their interactions, confidence and leadership aspirations (Carter, 2013; Mayanja, 2018). Harwood (2021) explains that individuals are motivated to maintain a positive self-concept by promoting the distinctiveness of their social groups. This theory is therefore appropriate because it helps explain how female students' social identities shape their motivation to pursue leadership positions in universities.

2.1.2 Resilience Theory

The Resilience theory was introduced by Garmezy (1970). As well as Werner's and Rutter's pioneering research, the study conducted by Garmezy served as bedrock for resilience theory. He explored processes through which positive adaptation and resilience developed in individuals who faced adversity (Luthar, 2015). Essentially, resilience can be described as "a dynamic process involving positive adaptation" (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543; Masten, 2021). Positive adaptation occurs when individuals succeed even when they experience stressful environments and environmental disadvantage (Parker, 2023). In other words, resilience focuses on individual reactions to negative situations (Ledesma, 2014). It describes the ability of leaders to remain committed, courageous and able to act according to their beliefs when confronted with challenges (Patterson & Patterson, 2001; Southwick et al., 2017; Masten, 2021). For instance, having the determination to continue working toward your goals, persevering through obstacles and remaining persistent are all factors that contribute to academic resilience and leadership. As a result, environments with high levels of adversity need resilient leaders who have the drive to foster positive change, take action and bounce back from failure (Setlhodi & Ramatsui, 2024). This theory is applied to the study because it highlights how resilience enables female student to overcome obstacles and persist in leadership despite institutional and societal challenges.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Factors Motivating Female Student Leaders to pursue Leadership Roles

Globally, increasing women's participation in university leadership will help create diversity and inclusive governance (UNESCO, 2020). Recent studies in Africa and Western Asia suggest that many female students aspire to leadership roles because of their strong desire to serve others and make meaningful contributions to society (Attom et al, 2021). Students can develop their leadership skills through opportunities available in universities and colleges. These opportunities allow students to grow skills and experience personal development. Ghamrawi et al. (2018), in their study, universities offer their students opportunities to develop leadership skills and often those who take advantage of these opportunities note increases in skill development and personal growth. Ghamrawi et al. further stated that these opportunities allow students to grow skills and experience personal development. A study by Frantz et al. (2021) found positive impacts on students' leadership skills after participating in leadership-development programmes in higher education. Students reported feeling more prepared, knowledgeable, skilled and motivated to take on leadership positions. Pule (2024) also found that students who engaged in leadership roles at South African universities experienced leadership development through reflection on their engagement. In Ghana, a study by Awaah et al. (2023) shows that student leaders acquire skills which result in developing competencies such as communication skills, decision-making skills and accountability. Ultimately, the research reviewed points to university-based leadership chances as beneficial for students' leadership skill development.

Women's desire to reach leadership positions in higher education might also stem from wanting to bring about change within the institutions they are involved in. Other drivers of motivation and progression include previous leadership roles and experience, qualifications, professional networking, mentoring, career development and leadership development opportunities. Mushibwe and Simuka (2021) research into universities in Zambia and Zimbabwe found that the drivers motivating women to pursue leadership roles were their abilities, experience they have acquired and qualifications. Mapunda and Tambwe (2024) have recognised mentoring, leadership development and networking as other key enablers of women's progression into leadership roles in higher education throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Mentorship and sponsorship are also highlighted by Rampersad (2024) in the context of South African higher education as key tools which enable women to develop their careers. However, Ghamrawi et al., (2018) asserted that even when some women are faced with non-conducive environments, they still participate in student politics out of passion and having strong believe that politics can be used to change the society.



Evidence in Ghana also shows that family approval and peer encouragements motivate female students to run for leadership positions (Attom et al., 2021; Awoniyi & Jokotagba, 2024). A study by Cullen-Lester et al. (2017), highlights that social supports which includes family, acts as a source of motivation that can allow women to become more involved in leadership situations. Family support has equally been identified as a significant motivational factor for women aspiring to leadership positions (Tarimo & Swai, 2024). However, some studies suggest that lack of family support may hamper women's leadership ambitions (Alshdiefat, 2024; Boulay, 2022). Peer relationships also influence female students' leadership aspirations. Students are often encouraged by their peers to take part in leadership activities (Kern & Selamat, 2021). Similarly, Chai (2015) and Dedicatoria et al. (2023) highlight the role of peer influence in encouraging students to take up leadership responsibilities. Networking prospects further provide women with social capital, knowledge and influence that strengthen their leadership opportunities (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016). However, although motivating factors increase women's likelihood to aspire for leadership positions, empirical studies have shown that women deciding to run for leadership positions is due to agency and supportive social and institutional environments. Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that motivation for leadership participation among women is not solely determined by personal characteristics but is shaped by access to resources, institutional support and opportunities for leadership development (Masten, 2021; Ungar, 2021).

Universities offer their students opportunities to develop leadership skills and often those who take advantage of these opportunities note increases in skill development and personal growth (Ghamrawi et al., 2018). While some people may take on leadership roles for power/status/financial incentives, women's motivations are often rooted in serving others, relationships and creating value (Madsen & Longman, 2020). Further, Longman (2018) observed that female student leaders are more likely to seek positions aligned with their passions and interests rather than prestige or authority. While the existence of inequalities in leadership and the famous "glass ceiling" women have to break through to obtain leadership positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016) limit female development into these roles, more women in leadership positions inspire additional female students to aspire to these roles, thus bridging the gender gap (Sabour, 2024).

Additionally, mentorship and exposure to leadership roles at an early age contribute to women's motivations to become leaders. Sun et al. (2017), posit that females are fully capable of taking on leadership roles from an early age. Shepherd (2017) argues that women often did not consider leadership aspirations until they were asked or pushed into doing so by colleagues or mentors. On the other hand, Mabokela and Mlambo (2017) found that women who entered leadership positions early in their careers felt isolated and more exposed to gender stereotypes. Being exposed to women in power also allows students to build upon their confidence, leadership self-concept and career goals (Askari et al., 2015; Nave, 2021). Research conducted in universities in United States showed that having female students who interact with women in leadership roles are more likely to aspire to leadership positions themselves (Boatwright, 2022; Wolniak et al., 2023). In Ghana, a study by Anderson et al. (2023) found that women in leadership positions therefore serve as important role models who encourage and empower other women.

The studies reviewed provide useful insights into student leadership, women's participation in leadership and the factors that influence women's advancement in higher education. However, an important empirical gap remains. Most of the existing literature focuses on women in senior university administration, or general student leadership development. Comparatively little empirical attention has been given to what specifically motivates female students to decide to contest Student Representative Council (SRC) positions in Ghanaian universities.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A phenomenological design was used to explore the motivations underlying student leadership at the university level. Phenomenology fits with the purpose of the study which is to interpret and understand the lived experiences, viewpoints and meanings of female students' motivation to engage in leadership in Ghanaian universities.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted at four (4) universities in Ghana. These consist of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), University of Cape Coast (UCC), the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) and University for Development Studies (UDS). Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) is a public university located in Kumasi, Ghana. Renowned across the continent, it stands as a leading institution for teaching science and technology. The University of Cape Coast (UCC) functions as a public university with a collegiate system nestled in the culturally significant town of Cape Coast, Central Region, Ghana. In response to the urgent need for highly qualified and competent staff in the education sector, the University of Cape Coast was founded as a university college in October 1962. Since then, the institution has expanded its functions to include training physicians and other health care professionals, administrators, business professionals, lawyers and agriculturalists. The University of Education,



Winneba (UEW), is based in the coastal town of Winneba in the Central Region of Ghana. It came into existence in 1992 and is tasked with the responsibility of training professional educators to drive a transformative national educational agenda aimed at advancing Ghana's economic and social progress. The University for Development Studies (UDS), founded in 1992 is Ghana's first public university in the northern region and offers top-notch higher education, conducts research and unites academia and the society. UDS two primary campuses are located in Tamale at Nyankpala and Dungu.

3.3 Target Population

The target population for the study was females in SRC leadership positions from the four (4) selected public universities in Ghana. Female SRC leaders were targeted for the study because of their lived experiences as SRC leaders and they have expertise in the subject matter hence would provide valuable information to the study.

3.4 Sampling and Sample size

Purposeful sampling technique was used to select the eighteen (18) participants from four public universities in Ghana. The four public universities were Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Winneba and University for Development Studies were used because they were selected because they are traditional universities in Ghana with relatively high women representation in SRC as compared to the rest and are in the northern, middle zone and southern sectors of the country and their population represents a significant percentage at the national level. The criteria for inclusion were females who had been elected as student representative council leaders from the selected universities and were serving for the academic years 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 purposefully selected to collect detailed and rich data from participants who were at different stages of leadership experiences. Female students who had completed their term in leadership were included so they can retrospect on their experiences as leaders and 2023 female students were included because they were serving and about to transfer power to their successors.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Semi structured interview guide and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide were the instruments used for data collection. An introductory letter was procured through the Department of Social Studies Education, University of Education, Winneba. The letter granted access to participants and assisted in obtaining permissions for data collection. Permission was requested through the SRC from the four (4) selected universities to administer the study. Once all requirements were met, permission was given for data collection to commence. Interviews were audio recorded which lasted between 45 to 50 minutes. Semi structured interview guide was used for probing in detail the reasons behind students' motivations to become leaders of the SRC while leaving room for asking questions and following up on issues that come up during the interview. Three Focus Group Discussions were held at three distinct universities namely, UCC, UEW and UDS to capture common experiences, varying perspectives and group reflections that are relevant in addressing the study's topic. The rationale for conducting three (3) different focus group discussions was that KNUST had only two (2) participants and could not meet the ideal number of focus group.

3.6 Data Analysis

A thematic approach to data analysis was employed to identify and interpret emerging patterns and themes from the participants' experiences. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically identify, analyse, organize and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This analysis was considered appropriate for the present study because it provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for examining participants' experiences, perceptions and meanings while allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were adhered to by securing informed consent from participants prior to interviews. Participants real names replaced with pseudonyms to prevent easy identification. Information given by participants were treated with much confidentiality and only used for the purpose of the study. Privacy of data was kept through ensuring anonymity and allowing the participants to withdraw at any time without repercussion.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study examined participants' demographic characteristics in terms of age, previous leadership experience, and current leadership positions. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Background Information of Participants

Participant ID	Age	Leadership Experience	Current Leadership Position
1.	20	JHS- Assistant Girls Prefect SHS- Library Prefect	SRC Women's Commissioner
2.	21	JHS- Section Leader, SHS- Library Prefect Vice President (student Association in church)	SRC General Secretary
3.	22	JHS- compound Prefect, SHS Head Girl, Church Leader	SRC Coordinating Secretary
4.	22	JHS- Head Girl, SHS -Assistant Head Girl Vice President NUP-G Hall Counsel Member Hall Secretary	SRC General Secretary
5.	23	SHS Dining Hall Prefect	SRC Women's Commissioner
6.	24	JHS sports prefect SRC Board secretary at the University	SRC Vice President
7.	22	JHS- Girls Prefect, Assistant Sunday School Prefect	Local NUGS Secretary
8.	26	Church Youth Leader GHAFERS General Secretary University Choir	SRC Women's Commissioner
9.	25	SHS- Library Prefect	SRC President
10.	30	JHS- Compound Overseer SHS- Choir Leader	SRC Treasurer
11.	23	JHS - Head Girl SHS - Assistant Girls Prefect	SRC Treasurer
12.	21	JHS - Assistant Girl's Prefect	Local NUGS Treasurer
13.	26	JHS- Assistant Girls Prefect SHS- Sports Prefect	SRC Sports and Games Treasurer
14.	23	JHS- Girls Prefect SHS- Assistant Girls Prefect	SRC Women's Commissioner
15.	22	JHS-Girl's Prefect SHS-dining hall prefect contestant	SRC General Secretary
16.	23	JHS-Girl's Prefect SHS- Girl's Prefect contestant	Local NUGS Treasurer
17.	23	JHS- Senior Prefect GAWA Secretary	NUGS Secretary
18.	24	JHS- Girls Prefect Sports Prefect SHS-Compound Overseer and Cultural show leader WOCOM in church	SRC President

The data provided on the Table shows that most participants (15 out of 18) had ages between 20–25 years, an age group commonly associated with university students completing their studies while taking on leadership responsibilities. The remaining three participants were aged 26–30, suggesting delayed leadership participation or a return to education after gaining life experience. The participants occupied different SRC leadership positions, including Women's Commissioner and SRC President. These roles involved responsibilities such as advocating for student welfare, managing administrative duties and representing students before university authorities. For instance, the SRC

Women's Commissioner focused on issues affecting female students, including sexual harassment and welfare concerns, while the SRC President supervised SRC activities and represented the entire student body. The variety of positions demonstrates the wide range of leadership opportunities available to female students in Ghanaian universities.

4.1.1 Factors Motivating Female Student Leaders to Seek Leadership Positions in Selected Universities in Ghana

Motivational Factors for Seeking Leadership Positions: The study explored the factors that motivate female students to seek leadership positions in four selected universities in Ghana. Four (4) major themes emerged from the findings. The first theme was Personal Motivation and Leadership Ambitions, the second theme was Influence of Role Models and Other key stakeholders, the third theme was Influence of Family and Peer and the final theme was Role of Gender in Leadership Decisions. Together, these themes provided deeper insight into the complex factors that motivated female students to pursue leadership positions within their universities and highlighted the interaction between personal ambition, social support and gender dynamics in shaping their leadership aspirations.

Personal Motivation and Leadership Ambitions: The findings showed that participants' decisions to seek leadership roles were influenced by self-inspiration and leadership ambitions. Many participants expressed a strong sense of responsibility and a commitment to positively impact their university communities. They also highlighted the influence of mentors and societal expectations on their leadership aspirations. In response to the question, "What prompted you to opt for this position?" several female leaders explained that their motivation to lead originated from personal inspiration and childhood ambitions. Some participants shared the following:

"When I was a child, I had an interest in leading people and impacting lives because I lacked role models, so I wanted to become someone others could look up to" (Participant 1, 20 years, SRC WOCOM, 5/08/2024).

"I have always loved to lead and wanted to speak for others and create positive change. With prior leadership experience, I felt it was important to apply my knowledge at the university level while also developing myself" (Participant 3, 22 years, SRC Coordinating Secretary, 13/08/2024).

These views reveal that some participants felt their decision to lead originated from within while others began from childhood ambitions. The findings are in line with the Social Identity Theory, which explains that self-defined identities shape leadership aspirations and actions (Mayanja, 2018; Carter, 2013). They also align with the work of Sun et al. (2017), who argue that girls are capable of assuming leadership roles from an early age. Furthermore, participants' desire to gain experience and improve their career prospects supports the assertion of Ghamrawi et al. (2018), who emphasise the developmental benefits of student leadership. The findings also suggest that leadership aspirations among female students are to a large extent influenced by early experiences and personal ambition.

Some of the responses are as follows:

"In SHS, I was encouraged by others to take up leadership roles because it suited me. I reflected on this and accepted the role. At university, the same encouragement continued and I eventually recognized my leadership desire" (Participant 5, 23 years, SRC WOCOM, 13/08/2024).

"I was motivated by others and my personal desire also pushed me to contest. My interest in sports and prior experience as a sports prefect also influenced my decision to pursue leadership" (Participant 13, 26 years, SRC Sports & Games Treasurer, 8/08/2024).

Many female student leaders indicated that their motivation is rooted in an internal sense of calling rather than solely external influence. These accounts suggest that while external encouragement plays a role, intrinsic motivation and personal interest are central to the decision to pursue leadership roles. The findings align with Madsen and Longman (2020), who argue that women are often motivated to lead by a desire to create positive change rather than by status or authority. Inversely, though these participants had the desire to pursue leadership roles, it was social recognition and external inspiration from others that encouraged them to engage in rigorous self-reflection before considering to pursue leadership responsibilities. The results indicate that formative experiences and personal interests significantly shape female students' leadership ambitions. Participant 17 explained that

"...my interest in leadership was sparked after attending a programme organised by a former NUGS president, where I observed effective teamwork among leaders...." (Participant 17, 23 years, NUGS Secretary, 23/08/2024).

Participant 18 indicated that

"My leadership inclination began in primary school, where I regularly volunteered to assist in group and community activities. Over time, my efforts were recognised and I was encouraged by others to take on greater responsibilities" (Participant 18, 24 years, SRC President, 20/08/2024).

The focus group discussion further revealed that many participants had held leadership positions from Junior High School through Senior High School to university. This continuous exposure to leadership experiences significantly shaped and reinforced their motivation to pursue leadership roles at the university level (FGD 2, 14/08/2024).

This is in tandem with the findings of Madsen and Longman (2020), who argue that individuals develop leadership through a sense of purpose and the adoption of a leadership identity. It also aligns with the work of Attom et al. (2021), who emphasise that female students are motivated to lead and serve others through active participation in leadership roles. The finding confirms that all eighteen participants had prior leadership experience at earlier stages, such as Girl's Prefect, Compound Prefect and Sports Prefect, which exposed and motivated them to pursue SRC leadership roles at the university level. Additionally, when asked, "What made you feel that you qualify for the position?" Participants offered varied perspectives reflecting their lived experiences, self-confidence, courage and institutional expectations. Participants stated:

"With my abilities and capabilities, I knew the secretary position was the one I wanted because it best reflected what I had built in myself. So, I opted for the SRC General Secretary position based on my communication skills, punctuality and outspoken nature, which I believed qualified me for the role" (Participant 2, 21 years, SRC General Secretary, 5/08/2024).

"I am confident that I am thriving, goal-oriented, able to communicate very well and a public figure. I believe I possess the required qualities, including advocacy skills and confidence, which made me qualified for the position" (Participant 17, 23 years, NUGS Secretary, 23/08/2024).

This finding is in consonance with Social Identity Theory, which asserts that appropriate leadership behaviours are closely linked to one's identity as a leader, influences task clarity, self-perception and acceptance of authority by followers (Tubin, 2017). This finding agrees with Mushibwe and Simuka (2021) study in Zambia and Zimbabwe that the drivers motivating females to aspire leadership positions were their abilities and qualifications. The study therefore affirms that participants were motivated by decisiveness, self-confidence and competence in overcoming obstacles to leadership roles. These views reveal that communication skills, public speaking ability, self-confidence, assertiveness and adaptability were key factors that made participants feel competent for leadership roles.

Influence of Role Models and Other key stakeholders: Furthermore, external influences and mentorship played a significant role in shaping participants' leadership aspirations. Many reported that encouragement from teachers, role models and mentors strengthened their confidence and motivated them to pursue leadership roles. These external actors helped reinforce participants' self-belief and aspiration to become effective leaders.

Participants stated:

"My leadership inspiration came from Hajia Samira. I admire Hajia Samira's confidence, eloquence and ability to influence others in my leadership journey" (Participant 1, 20 years, SRC WOCOM, 5/08/2024).

"Madam Esther, played a key role in shaping my leadership aspirations by consistently encouraging me, making learning simple and engaging. I also drew inspiration from a female Member of Parliament in Kenya, whose confidence and public speaking skills motivated me further" (Participant 11, 23 years, SRC Treasurer, 19/08/2024).

"Mr. Christopher, identified my leadership potential early and encouraged me to take on responsibilities as an "office girl." This experience, though challenging at the time, helped me develop leadership skills and confidence, which continued to influence my later leadership journey" (Participant 4, 22 years, SRC General Secretary, 13/08/2024).

This finding aligns with Social Identity Theory, which suggests that female student leaders often require support to address confidence gaps and develop a strong leadership identity (Fuselier & Beatty, 2023; Kay & Shipman, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Contact with successful women in leadership roles enhanced female students' self-concept regarding their leadership abilities to pursue leadership roles (Askari et al., 2015; Nave, 2021). Through mentorship and guidance, participants were able to strengthen and construct their leadership identities. However, this finding contrasts with Mabokela and Mlambo (2017), who argue that women who assume leadership roles early often experience loneliness, exposed and vulnerable to gender stereotypes. In this study, early exposure to leadership instead enhanced participants' confidence and helped unlock their capabilities, providing a strong foundation for future leadership pursuits.

Family influence: The analysis showed that many female students received support and inspiration from family members in pursuing leadership roles. Family support, including advice and financial assistance, contributed to their leadership development. However, some participants were initially discouraged due to concerns about balancing leadership and academic work. Despite this, most families later became supportive after observing their commitment. **Unwavering Family Support:** Family involvement emerged as an important source of inspiration for several participants. Participants shared their experiences and stated:

"My mother supported me and I am fortunate to have family supporting and inspiring me" (Participant 7, 22 years, Local NUGS Secretary, 14/08/2024).

"... after speaking to my family about it, they were supportive and all I saw was a good step" (Participant 15, 22 years, SRC General Secretary, 22/08/2024).

These views highlight strong family support, which reinforced participants' aspirations to become leaders. This underscores the importance of a supportive family environment in shaping the leadership development of young women. The finding aligns with the work of Tarimo and Swai (2024), that family support has been recognized as a key motivating factor influencing women's aspirations to pursue leadership positions. Initial Resistance Followed by Support: In the initial stage, some participants experienced opposition or hesitation from family members, often due to concerns about the demands of leadership or fear of failure.

"My mother was afraid initially, she said, 'they will kill you for me, I am afraid oh (laughs)' ... but later she encouraged me, praying for me and advising me throughout the journey" (Participant 3, 22 years, SRC Coordinating Secretary, 13/08/2024).

"My mother said I should not even try because she feared I would be harmed, but I was able to convince her and she eventually started praying for me" (Participant 18, 24 years, SRC President, 20/08/2024)

Ambiguity about the scope of leadership roles and their impact on students' academic progress was a common concern among families. However, as participants demonstrated commitment and persistence, initial doubts from families gradually reduced. This finding contrasts the works of Alshdiefat (2024) and Boulay (2022), that inadequate family support hinder women's aspirations to pursue leadership positions. This family reluctance contrasts with Western literature, where institutional barriers are more commonly emphasized than family-related ones (Bowen, 2024). While global research often emphasizes systemic barriers such as the "glass ceiling," the findings of this study revealed that participants frequently encountered obstacles originating within the family environment during their early leadership journeys. The lack of familial support underscored participants' reliance on personal agency, resilience and self-motivation to pursue and realize their leadership aspirations.

Neutral Support or Discouragement: Unlike participants who received strong support, a few experienced discouragements from their families, who were concerned about the potential negative impact of leadership on academic performance. For these participants, family support was either minimal or absent.

"I was only going my way. My father was not in support of this; all he wants is academics. He did not give me any support" (Participant 6, 24 years, SRC Vice President, 14/08/2024).

"No, my family did not encourage me. Before I went for the competition, they were not certain I would win" (Participant 12, 21 years, Local NUGS Treasurer, 08/08/2024).

The findings demonstrate participants' resilience, as many pursued leadership roles despite limited or no family endorsement, reflecting strong determination and self-confidence. The findings align with resilience theory, which emphasizes that resilient leaders act on their convictions despite challenges (Patterson & Patterson, 2001; Southwick et al., 2017; Masten, 2021). This suggests that although family support is important, it is not the sole determinant of leadership success. **Peer Influence** Some participants indicated that their leadership goals were influenced by peers and friends who recognized their potential and encouraged them to take up leadership roles.

Participants had this to say:

"Yeah, a friend of mine told me not to worry and that he would be a backbone for me, so he supported me and that is how my interest in leadership started" (Participant 10, 30 years, SRC Treasurer, 19/08/2024).

"At first, I was not sure about contesting for SRC President, but my friend encouraged me, saying no female had contested that position before and I should try. His encouragement pushed me to go for it" (Participant 9, 25 years, SRC President, 23/08/2024).

The confidence peers show in individuals' abilities helps reduce self-doubt and encourages action. The influence of peers in this study aligns with Chai (2015), who emphasizes that peers play a significant role in motivating students to assume leadership positions. Peer recognition reflects a global trend where young women are influenced by supportive networks, strengthening their sense of competence and inclusion in leadership spaces. **Role of Gender in Leadership Decision:** The findings indicated that gender played an important role in shaping participants' leadership choices. Many female student leaders reported that their gender influenced their leadership aspirations, with some viewing it as a source of motivation. **Perceived Gender-Assigned Roles in Leadership** For some participants, cultural expectations about gender influenced their decisions to contest for leadership positions.

"Most of the time, the role of the secretary is seen as a position for females, so I decided to give it a try, especially since women are not often visible in leadership positions" (Participant 2, 21 years, SRC General Secretary, 5/08/2024).

"Yes, the Women's Commissioner role is for women only, so my gender influenced my decision to contest for that portfolio" (Participant 8, 26 years, SRC WOCOM, 20/08/2024).

Views from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion indicate that societal norms significantly influence women's selection of leadership roles. Many participants believed their gender aligned with roles traditionally considered feminine, such as Women's Commissioner and Treasurer. This perception reinforced their sense of belonging and confidence in taking up such positions. This finding supports Hogg (2001), who argues that women in leadership are often channelled into roles viewed as feminine, such as human resources and student welfare. Determination to

Challenge Gender Stereotypes: Some participants, however, expressed a strong determination to challenge gender norms. They viewed their gender not as a limitation but as motivation to demonstrate that women can excel in leadership roles traditionally dominated by men. The following are some of the views expressed by the participants:

“I do not see my gender as an obstacle because I believe what a man can do, a woman can do better. I wanted to change the narrative. Men always want to lead but, in a male-dominated place like this, no female stands up... I wanted to challenge societal norms. I was contesting with two males and being the only female did not push me back. I did everything, I pushed harder and won” (Participant 17, 23years, NUGS Secretary, 23/08/2024).

“One of my objectives was to prove that a female could win the SRC president position and break the chain of male dominance. If I should win, that will be history and motivate other ladies. Over the years, it has always been males. But if a female can break that chain, others will follow” (Participant 18, 24years, SRC President, 20/08/2024).

These participants emphasized their conviction and skills, refusing to allow social norms to limit their leadership abilities. The idea of “turning adversity into motivation” offers a culturally grounded insight into how challenges are reframed as opportunities. Some participants viewed their gender as motivation to challenge societal expectations, aligning with Longman (2018) view of female student leaders who seek to break established norms. The study therefore affirms that women continue to confront gender norms by either aligning with or resisting cultural expectations to create opportunities for others. This aligns with resilience theory, which highlights the need for courageous leaders who persevere and drive change in challenging environments (Setlhodi & Ramatsui, 2024). Many participants focused on their strengths and qualifications rather than gender-based limitations. In contrast to some Western literature, where stereotypes are seen primarily as barriers to leadership, the findings of this study show that female student leaders in Ghana sometimes use these stereotypes as motivation to reshape leadership norms. This suggests that while stereotypes are globally present, responses to them are culturally shaped, with Ghanaian female student leaders demonstrating a form of “stereotype resilience” less emphasized in Western contexts.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Female student leaders’ decision to aspire campus leadership roles is not just an individual choice but a socially and institutionally constructed process, influenced by identity formation, resilience and social support systems. They maintained their goals through personal ambition and drive, leadership skills and were able to overcome adversity by creating opportunities out of obstacles for their own growth. The study concludes that despite leadership challenges, strong-minded female students successfully undertake leadership roles, gaining valuable experience and nurturing their potential. Also, past leadership exposure at an early stage serves as a catalyst for imminent leadership opportunities. Female student leaders used their gender as a motivator to challenge leadership stereotypes. Although some families supported them, others also served as initial leadership barrier but later supported their daughters' involvement in student leadership.

5.2 Recommendations

From the findings of the study, it is recommended that stakeholders such as parents, mentors and teachers should guide female students to identify their leadership potential early and also equip them with leadership skills to help them overcome challenges and build confidence and leadership identity. Furthermore, universities in collaboration with SRCs and NUGS should promote purpose-driven leadership training to empower female students to view leadership as a tool for transformation and venture into leadership positions within the university and beyond. Universities should implement comprehensive interventions that promote mentorship, leadership development programmes, gender-inclusive policies and institutional support structures to encourage greater participation of women in student leadership.

Declaration of Interest

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