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Navigating Gendered Power Structures: Challenges Confronting Female Student Leaders in Ghanaian Universities

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Abstract

This study examined how female student leaders navigate gendered power structures and the challenges that shape their legitimacy and participation within university governance systems. The study was underpinned by Role Congruity Theory, which explores biases against women in leadership roles. The study employed a qualitative approach, utilising a phenomenological design across four selected public universities in Ghana due to their high levels of female representation. Eighteen (18) participants were purposively selected for the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with all the participants, while 16 of them from three of the universities were involved in a focus group discussion. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal four interconnected constraints: patriarchal norms that delegitimise female authority, gender stereotyping reinforced by male numerical dominance, sexual harassment embedded in electoral and sponsorship systems and institutional exclusion through formal and informal gatekeeping. These dynamics construct leadership as masculine, compelling women to continuously negotiate credibility, visibility and authority. The study further demonstrates that exclusion is structurally embedded, with constitutional representation rights often undermined by informal patriarchal practices, producing a dual system of formal inclusion and substantive exclusion. The study concludes that within the context examined, the challenges confronting female student leaders stem not only from individual capacity deficits but from structural inequalities that limit their participation and leadership experiences. The study recommends that universities should strengthen gender-responsive policies to address patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, sexual harassment and formal and informal gatekeeping practices that exclude female students from leadership.

Key terms: Female student leadership, gendered power structures, Ghana, higher education, Role Congruity Theory.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Universities are central sites for leadership formation, democratic socialisation and civic engagement, where students acquire competencies necessary for future governance and national development (Kiersch & Peters, 2017). Within these institutions, student leadership is intended to function as an inclusive platform for cultivating leadership capacity across gender lines. However, despite the increasing participation of women in higher education in Africa, leadership representation within university governance structures remains persistently skewed in favour of men (Morley, 2013). In Ghanaian universities, student leadership operates within deeply entrenched gendered power structures that shape who is perceived as a legitimate leader and whose authority is socially and institutionally recognised (Anderson, 2025). These structures are sustained through male-dominated political networks and informal institutional practices that systematically disadvantage female students (Piggott & Pike, 2020). Consequently, female student leaders are not only underrepresented but are also required to continuously negotiate their legitimacy within environments where leadership is implicitly coded as masculine. There seem to be barriers which undermine women's participation in student governance and weaken broader institutional efforts aimed at promoting gender equity and inclusive leadership within higher education in Ghana. Leadership is frequently associated with masculinity, assertiveness and dominance, while women are socially expected to occupy supportive and less visible roles (Moodly, 2024). In many Ghanaian societies, patriarchal norms and traditional gender expectations continue to shape perceptions regarding leadership and authority (Adongo et al., 2023). These societal constructions are often reproduced within university environments, thereby creating challenges for female students who aspire to leadership positions.

Although scholarship on gender and leadership in higher education has expanded, existing studies have largely focused on academic staff, senior administrators, or national political leadership, giving little attention to the micro-politics of student governance. For instance, Morley (2013) explored gender inequalities and structural barriers affecting women's access to senior leadership positions in higher education, while Boateng (2018) examined the experiences of female academics in Ghana. However, these studies primarily focused on academic staff and institutional leaders rather than female students occupying leadership positions within university governance structures. Attom et al. (2021) investigated female students' leadership experiences at the University of Education, Winneba, highlighting challenges such as gender stereotypes, sociocultural expectations, financial constraints and institutional barriers. Similarly, Anderson (2025) examined gender imbalances in student politics in Ghanaian higher education institutions, revealing the persistent underrepresentation of women in student leadership and the influence of male-dominated political structures on their participation. Mayanja (2022) examined the participation of female student representatives in public university councils in Uganda, focusing on their experiences and the challenges they encountered.

Despite these contributions, important empirical gaps remain regarding the challenges confronting female student leaders within Students' Representative Councils (SRCs) across Ghanaian universities. While Attom et al. (2021) provided insights into the challenges experienced by female student leaders within a single university, Anderson (2025) offered a broader historical perspective on gender inequalities in student politics, with less emphasis on the lived experiences of female SRC leaders as they navigate leadership responsibilities. Mayanja's (2022) study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by female student leaders; it was conducted within the Ugandan higher education context and focused on female

representatives on university councils. This creates a significant gap in understanding how institutional cultures, electoral dynamics and informal networks shape the lived realities of female student leaders. Against this backdrop, the study critically examines the challenges female student leaders experience within university political spaces. It further explores how these gendered dynamics influence women's access to leadership positions, the recognition of their authority and their capacity to exercise effective leadership within Ghanaian university governance systems.

This study contributes to contemporary debates on gender, leadership and higher education transformation by examining the challenges confronting female student leaders in selected universities in Ghana. The study situates women's leadership experiences within broader discussions on gender inequality, institutional exclusion and youth political participation. The research question that guided the study is: What challenges are female student leaders confronted with in selected public universities in Ghana?

By exploring the structural and cultural barriers affecting female student leaders, the study provides important insights into the persistence of gendered inequalities within higher education institutions. The findings are expected to inform policies and institutional reforms aimed at promoting equitable participation, strengthening inclusive governance and enhancing women's leadership development within Ghanaian universities and similar contexts across Africa.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Underpinning: Role Congruity Theory

Role Congruity Theory, proposed by Eagly and Karau (2002), provides a robust analytical framework for examining the gendered barriers confronting female student leaders in Ghanaian universities. The theory is premised on two central propositions. First, women may be evaluated less favourably than men as potential leaders because stereotypical beliefs about women, such as being nurturing and communal, are perceived to differ from the qualities traditionally associated with effective leadership, including assertiveness and authority (Eagly, 1987). Second, when women occupy leadership positions, they may face additional prejudice because their leadership behaviour can be judged as inconsistent with expectations of how women should behave (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, women who demonstrate traditionally feminine characteristics may be perceived as lacking leadership competence, while those who display assertiveness and authority may be viewed as violating feminine expectations. These conflicting expectations can undermine women's leadership legitimacy, restrict their access to leadership opportunities and shape how their authority is received by others.

Within university political environments, these gendered expectations shape electoral dynamics, leadership legitimacy, peer perceptions and institutional attitudes toward female student leaders. Women aspiring to leadership roles may therefore experience stereotyping, marginalisation, political intimidation and heightened scrutiny because their participation disrupts patriarchal assumptions regarding authority and governance (Boateng, 2018). Female leaders who demonstrate confidence and assertiveness may be labelled aggressive or unfeminine, while those who conform to traditional feminine expectations may be perceived as weak and ineffective. This leadership double bind undermines women's legitimacy and reinforces exclusionary governance cultures within higher education institutions.

Role Congruity Theory is therefore relevant to this study because it explains how socially embedded gender stereotypes shape leadership prejudice, institutional exclusion and women's underrepresentation within student governance systems. The theory further provides insight into the structural and cultural mechanisms sustaining gender inequalities in higher education leadership.

Challenges Facing Female Student Leaders

Female student leaders may encounter difficulties navigating institutional governance arrangements and exercising meaningful influence over decision-making. Although SRC executives are elected to represent student interests, their ability to fulfil these responsibilities may depend on institutional regulations, relationships with university authorities and access to decision-making structures (Addo et al., 2023). The distinction between occupying a leadership position and exercising effective leadership authority is particularly relevant to female student executives, whose participation may be shaped by broader institutional expectations and gendered power relations. Although women have made considerable progress in accessing higher education, their participation in student governance, particularly in influential Student Representative Council (SRC) positions, remains unequal (Anderson, 2025). Unlike women in academic or organisational leadership, female student leaders operate within political environments characterised by electoral competition, peer mobilisation, political alliances and institutional negotiations (Ewemooje et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2024). These conditions expose female students to challenges that may differ from those experienced by women in other leadership settings. Anderson (2025), in examining gender inequalities in student politics in Ghanaian higher education institutions, established that men have historically dominated student leadership despite the existence of gender-neutral policies governing students' political participation. The study demonstrates that formal opportunities for political participation do not necessarily translate into equal representation, raising important questions about the social and institutional factors that continue to restrict women's participation in student governance.

One of the major challenges confronting female student leaders is the persistence of gender stereotypes within campus political environments. Anderson (2025) highlighted the historical underrepresentation of women in Ghanaian student politics, demonstrating that student governance has remained predominantly male-dominated despite efforts to promote gender equality. Similarly, Gwirayi (2007), in a study of gender and elections into student representative councils in Zimbabwe, found that students' perceptions of leadership positions were influenced by traditional gender expectations. The findings revealed that male students were more likely to be considered suitable for influential positions such as SRC president and secretary-general, whereas female students were more frequently associated with positions such as treasurer and catering officer. Attom et al. (2021) found that certain student leadership positions were perceived as more appropriate for men, while female students who contested such positions encountered cultural setbacks. These findings suggest that gender stereotypes influence not only women's access to student leadership but also the types of positions they are perceived as capable of occupying. These constraints are reinforced by gender bias and cultural norms that define leadership as a masculine domain (Bergmann et al., 2022).

Longman et al. (2018) highlight that gendered organisational cultures can negatively influence women's leadership aspirations, sense of belonging and experiences within leadership environments. As a result, women leaders are often evaluated through contradictory expectations: they are criticised for being either too soft or too assertive (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). This double bind generates reputational penalties, where assertive women are labelled negatively, reinforcing systemic discouragement and limiting

leadership participation (Brescoll, 2016). Consequently, gender stereotypes operate as cognitive and institutional filters that shape access to leadership opportunities. Such perceptions may discourage female students from contesting influential SRC positions and reinforce male dominance within student governance structures.

Further, leadership in many institutional contexts is embedded within patriarchal systems that privilege male authority and normalise masculine leadership dominance (Ade, 2021). These systems are reinforced through organisational norms, cultural traditions and informal power structures that marginalise women (Buqa, 2022; Piggott & Pike, 2020). Patriarchy not only excludes women but also shapes intra-gender dynamics. In African institutional contexts, Attom et al. (2021) and Sabour (2024) highlight that leadership spaces are embedded in patriarchal political cultures where decision-making networks remain male-dominated. Alshdiefat et al. (2024) further emphasise that weak institutional gender policies and limited leadership pipelines reproduce exclusionary systems.

Financial constraints also constitute a significant concern in student electoral participation. Busia et al. (2021) demonstrated the importance of material resources in Ghanaian campus electoral processes, while Mayanja (2022) found that female student representatives in Uganda encountered inadequate resources that restricted their effective participation in university governance. The latter study also revealed that negative societal perceptions and confidence-related challenges affected female students' participation in student governance. Together, these studies suggest that financial limitations may interact with sociocultural expectations to influence women's electoral opportunities.

Female student leaders may encounter difficulties gaining political recognition and acceptance within male-dominated campus environments. According to Cheng et al. (2023), men's continued dominance and greater access to power contribute to women's disproportionate representation in leadership positions within contemporary institutions, including universities. Similarly, Gwirayi (2007) demonstrated that students' gendered perceptions influenced their preferences for candidates occupying particular leadership positions. These findings indicate that female students may face additional pressure to demonstrate their leadership capabilities and establish their legitimacy as political representatives. Such challenges can be understood through Role Congruity Theory, which explains that prejudice against women leaders may emerge when societal expectations associated with femininity are perceived as inconsistent with the characteristics traditionally associated with leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Within student politics, this theoretical perspective helps explain why female candidates may encounter resistance even when they possess the qualifications and leadership experience required to contest SRC positions.

A critical examination of the literature reveals valuable but somewhat fragmented insights into the challenges facing female student leaders. Anderson (2025) offers an important historical and gender-focused understanding of women's underrepresentation in Ghanaian student politics. In contrast, Gwirayi (2007) and Mayanja (2022) provide more direct evidence of gender stereotypes and inadequate financial resources affecting female students' participation in SRC leadership. However, these studies differ in their geographical contexts, methodological approaches and areas of emphasis. In particular, studies of electoral clientelism in Ghana do not sufficiently explain how female students experience campus political networks, while studies focusing on gender inequalities provide limited insight into how women navigate electoral competition and sustain leadership after assuming office. These limitations demonstrate the need

for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges confronting female student leaders within Ghanaian universities.

Sexual harassment is widely recognised as a manifestation of unequal power relations that can undermine women's participation, dignity and advancement within educational and organisational settings (Adu et al., 2023; Morley, 2011). Bhatti and Ali (2022) reiterate that women leaders face exploitation and sexual harassment from men. As a result, such harassment has an effect on women and also perpetuates an environment that inhibits women's involvement in leadership. However, understanding sexual harassment among female Student Representative Council (SRC) leaders requires attention to the distinctive political and institutional environment in which student governance operates. Unlike conventional workplace settings, SRC leadership involves electoral competition, political alliances, campaign financing and negotiations with university authorities. These relationships may create opportunities for the abuse of political influence and institutional authority, particularly where access to resources, privileges and leadership opportunities is shaped by unequal power relations (Busia et al., 2021; Hlatshwayo & Mfeka, 2024). Nyarko Adu et al. (2024), in a survey of 926 students across four public universities in Ghana, examined gender differences in sexual harassment experiences and coping strategies. Although the Busia et al. (2021) study did not investigate sexual coercion, it demonstrates that access to resources and political relationships can influence campus electoral processes. Despite the contributions of existing research, the experiences of female SRC executives remain insufficiently examined in the specific context of sexual harassment linked to electoral and institutional benefits. Investigating these experiences within Ghanaian universities can therefore extend existing scholarship by clarifying the forms of harassment female student executives (SRC) encounter, the power relations that sustain them and their implications for women's participation and effectiveness in student governance.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that female student leaders operate within gendered legitimacy economies, where authority is negotiated through cultural acceptance rather than formal position alone. More critically, there is limited empirical explanation of how gendered legitimacy is constructed within Ghanaian SRC structures as lived political arenas. Thus, the micro-dynamics of electoral politics, peer legitimacy and institutional recognition of female student leaders remain under-theorised in Ghanaian higher education research.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research approach, employing a phenomenological design to explore the challenges confronting female student leaders in the selected Ghanaian universities. The approach was used to enable an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and interpretations of the challenges they encountered while pursuing and exercising leadership roles within Student Representative Councils (SRCs). The phenomenological design was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how female student leaders experienced and interpreted the challenges associated with their participation in SRC leadership. Phenomenology investigates how individuals experience, interpret and attach meaning to a particular phenomenon within their social and institutional contexts (Frechette et al., 2020). The design was also consistent with the study's research question, which provided a framework for understanding challenges from the perspectives of the female student leaders (SRC) who had directly experienced them, while exploring how they interpreted and navigated such challenges within their respective university contexts.

The study was conducted in four public universities in Ghana: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), University of Cape Coast (UCC), University of Education, Winneba (UEW) and University for Development Studies (UDS). These institutions were purposively selected because of their relatively high representation of women in student leadership, providing opportunities for an in-depth exploration of female leadership experiences across different public university contexts. The inclusion criteria were female students who held elected SRC executive positions during the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years in the four selected public universities in Ghana. These cohorts were selected to capture the experiences of female student leaders who had completed their tenure and those still serving or preparing to hand over. This provided both retrospective and current perspectives, allowing the study to identify similarities and differences in the challenges encountered in SRC leadership.

Purposive sampling was used to select eighteen female participants from the four selected public universities in Ghana (KNUST-2, UCC-5, UEW-5 and UDS-6) with direct leadership experience in the SRC category (SRC President, SRC Vice President, Secretary, NUGS Secretary, SRC Women's Commissioner (WOCOM), SRC Sports and Games Treasurer). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with all participants, while 16 participants from three universities also took part in focus group discussions. The interviews explored participants' experiences of political marginalisation, gender stereotyping, institutional discrimination and leadership negotiation within university political spaces. Three separate focus group discussions were held in three (3) universities, namely UDS, UCC and UEW. The justification for the three (3) distinct focus group discussions was that KNUST female SRC leaders were only two (2) and could not meet the ideal number of focus groups. The focus group discussions enabled collective reflection on shared gendered experiences and institutional power structures. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. We obtained institutional approval and informed consent before data collection.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis guided by the framework of Braun et al. (2019). The analysis involved familiarisation with transcripts, inductive coding, theme development and interpretive refinement. The study critically examined how patriarchal institutional cultures, gender norms and political practices shaped female student leadership experiences. Themes relating to exclusion, resistance, negotiation and leadership identity construction were interpreted within the broader context of gendered power relations in higher education. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation, member checking and prolonged engagement with participants. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced through reflexive memoing and systematic documentation of interview transcripts, field notes, coding decisions and emerging themes. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the selected universities, SRC leadership structures, participants' backgrounds and institutional contexts. Ethical principles relating to confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and voluntary participation were strictly observed. Pseudonyms were used to replace participants' identities, and all research data were securely stored for academic purposes only.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section addresses the research question by examining the challenges confronting female student leaders in selected Ghanaian universities. Four interconnected themes emerged: patriarchal norms and leadership legitimacy, gender stereotyping and male dominance, sexual harassment and exploitation and institutional exclusion.

Patriarchal Norms and Leadership Legitimacy

Participants consistently described student leadership spaces as socially constructed around masculine norms, where leadership authority was frequently associated with men. Female leaders were often required to justify their legitimacy in ways that male counterparts were not. Cultural expectations shaped electoral dynamics, peer perceptions and institutional interactions, reinforcing assumptions that leadership is naturally male-oriented.

One participant explained;

> *Some students supported my opponents because they are males… they said, how could a female rule them (Participant 18, 24 years, SRC President).*

Another participant stated;

> *You know, this is a place where men are perceived to dominate in everything. They believe that naturally women should not lead; we should always follow. So, during the campaigning, some of the students said, " It has never happened before; a lady cannot do it. No lady has done it, so they cannot guarantee that I will do anything good… (Participant 9, 25years, SRC President).*

Participant 3 also narrated;

> *I faced a challenge of getting a venue for a programme, and when I went to see the facility manager, he did not give me access to the venue. So, I had to go to the SRC President, but when he went to him, the facility manager said, " Oh, President, it is fine; you can have the place. Some of them would want to see the president because I am a female (Participant 3, 22years, SRC Coordinating Secretary).*

The findings revealed that patriarchal norms and traditional gender expectations influenced the perceived legitimacy of female student leaders within SRC structures. Participants indicated that some students questioned their leadership abilities and suitability for office simply because they were women. This was reflected in participants' accounts that some students preferred male candidates and believed that women should follow rather than lead. These experiences suggest that gender-based assumptions, rather than leadership competence alone, influenced how some female students were perceived within university leadership structures. The findings align with studies highlighting the persistence of patriarchal structures within African higher education leadership contexts (Attom et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with Eagly and Karau's (2002) Role Congruity Theory, which explains that women may encounter prejudice in leadership positions because of the perceived incompatibility between traditional feminine roles and the characteristics associated with leadership. The findings further suggest that patriarchal beliefs may extend into university student governance, where female leaders must negotiate gendered expectations to gain acceptance and recognition.

Gender Stereotyping and Male Dominance

Gender stereotyping emerged as a pervasive barrier affecting both access to leadership and leadership performance. Female leaders were frequently perceived as overly emotional, fragile or incapable of handling demanding leadership responsibilities, while assertiveness and authority were associated with

men. Participants described leadership spaces where male executives dominated decision-making processes and female contributions were marginalised.
One participant explained:

> *I did face gender stereotypes and discrimination. Some of the students said that when women are empowered and get to higher offices, they become arrogant and tend to behave in a certain way* (Participant 14, *23 years, SRC Women's Commissioner).*

> *Mostly, the male executives say that the women leaders cannot do it because we are females. They tell us that females are so fragile that some of the leadership challenges we cannot handle, and it should be given to the males. So, there is this kind of gender bias after we assumed office. The males dominate in decision-making because of their numbers and sometimes portray themselves as superior to females* (*Participant 1, 20 years, Women's Commissioner).*

Another participant expressed that;

> *Most positions are occupied by males… when decisions are made, female contributions are ignored because we are few (Participant 11, 23 years, SRC Treasurer)*

Similarly, another participant noted:

> *As a female leader, when you go to authorities, they do not see you; they see you as an ant. But a male will have their attention. (Participant 2, 21 years, SRC General Secretary).*

These narratives reveal how gender bias extends beyond interpersonal attitudes into institutional practices that privilege masculine authority and undermine female visibility within governance structures. Female leaders who challenged dominant norms were often labelled "arrogant" or "disrespectful," reflecting broader attempts to regulate women's participation within male-dominated spaces. The findings support Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which argues that prejudice emerges when socially prescribed female roles conflict with dominant expectations of leadership. In this context, leadership was constructed as assertive and masculine, while women were expected to embody supportive and compliant roles. This incongruence reduced perceptions of legitimacy and constrained leadership agency. The findings support Cheng et al. (2023)'s assertion that, due to men's greater domination and power over women, men hold more leadership positions in contemporary institutions such as the university. However, Anderson (2025) argued that men have historically dominated student leadership, influencing their political structures on female participation.

Sexual Harassment and Gendered Exploitation

Sexual harassment and exploitation emerged as significant challenges confronting female student leaders during campaigns, leadership activities and institutional engagements. Participants described experiences of unsolicited sexual advances, coercion and transactional demands linked to political support, sponsorship and institutional access. One participant stated:

> *Some male students demanded sex before they would vote for me." (Participant 8, 26 years, SRC Women's Commissioner)*

Another participant explained:

> *Some big men demand sexual favours before they offer sponsorship for programmes. This is difficult because I am the Women's Commissioner and some of the programmes I organise, I need to go and lobby for partnership and sponsorship. Some of the companies, when I go, I see one or two people trying to exploit me sexually before they even give me that sponsorship (Participant 14, 23 years, SRC Women's Commissioner).*

In a focus group discussion, participants shared the following;

> *…we have to go and look for our own sponsorship, so it becomes a difficult task for us. These men will tell us to sexually satisfy them, and they will do whatever we want for them. And most of the time… making us struggle to get these sponsorships. (Participant 1- FGD).*

Although sexual harassment may be considered a generic problem which all girls face, including those who did not contest for positions, it was a challenge for most female students in leadership roles because of the exposure; they become popular. Sexual harassment can kill the potential of female leaders because they may be susceptible, which will deter others from aspiring to positions. This finding demonstrates that female student leaders often operated within conditional support environments where access to resources and political opportunities were tied to gendered vulnerability. Harassment therefore functioned not only as interpersonal misconduct but also as a structural mechanism reinforcing unequal power relations within student governance systems. The findings align with Nyarko Adu et al. (2024) and Morley (2011) arguments that sexual harassment is seen as a display of unequal power relations that can undermine women's participation, self-respect and progression within educational settings. The study further extends existing scholarship by showing how leadership visibility and dependence on sponsorship structures increase vulnerability among female student leaders. Despite these challenges, several participants demonstrated resistance by rejecting exploitative demands despite the potential loss of political or financial support. Such responses highlight both the resilience of female leaders and the structural costs associated with ethical resistance within patriarchal institutional settings.

Institutional Exclusion and Structural Constraints

Beyond interpersonal discrimination, participants identified institutional practices that limited women's participation and recognition within governance structures. Some female leaders reported exclusion from representation opportunities, limited access to institutional support and unequal treatment within administrative processes. One participant explained:

> *According to the constitution, I was supposed to represent students on council, but I was denied because I am female. (Participant 18, 24 years, SRC President)*

A follow-up question was asked, and the participant narrated;

> *I was denied. I realised that because I am a female, I was denied the chance. Yes, I was just denied the position or opportunity because I was seen as a female. That is the fact that if there were any other male, that person would have gotten that position (Participant 18, 24 years, SRC President).*

These experiences indicate that institutional barriers extended beyond informal bias into structural exclusion embedded within governance practices. Although universities formally promote student participation and equality, participants' experiences suggest that institutional systems often reproduce existing gender hierarchies through inconsistent implementation of policies and unequal recognition of female authority.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that female student leadership is negotiated within deeply gendered institutional environments characterised by patriarchal norms, unequal power relations and weak institutional support systems. These intersecting challenges not only constrained leadership participation but also affected confidence, wellbeing and leadership effectiveness among female student leaders. The case of denied council representation illustrates a deeper layer of institutional exclusion, where even constitutionally guaranteed leadership roles are subject to gendered gatekeeping. This suggests that formal governance frameworks are undermined by informal patriarchal norms, creating a dual system of inclusion and exclusion. Such dynamics demonstrate that gender bias in student leadership is not merely interpersonal but structurally embedded within institutional governance systems, affecting access, authority and legitimacy.

This also reflects broader scholarship on institutional patriarchy, where organisational systems reproduce male dominance through both formal and informal mechanisms of power (Ade, 2021). Male numerical superiority in leadership positions reinforces agenda-setting control, which in turn shapes perceptions of competence and legitimacy. Furthermore, the findings indicate that repeated exposure to exclusionary practices may contribute to internalised doubt and reduced leadership confidence among female leaders, consistent with Longman et al. (2018), who observed how gendered organisational culture affects women in leadership.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concludes that female student leadership in selected Ghanaian universities is shaped by interconnected structural, cultural and interpersonal barriers that undermine women's leadership participation, legitimacy and effectiveness. Patriarchal norms that delegitimise female authority, gender stereotyping reinforced by male numerical dominance in leadership structures, sexual harassment and exploitation embedded within political and sponsorship systems and institutional exclusion manifested through both formal and informal governance practices define female student leaders' experience. This situation demonstrates that formal policies guaranteeing equal participation do not necessarily translate into equitable leadership experiences, as informal gatekeeping and entrenched gender expectations continue to challenge women's authority and influence within SRC structures.

Recommendations: University management and SRC should organise gender-sensitisation programmes, structured mentorship, leadership forums and campus campaigns that promote women's leadership capabilities and challenge beliefs that leadership authority belongs primarily to men to broaden perceptions of leadership beyond masculine-coded expectations.

Female student leaders need to cultivate personal resilience, self-confidence and determination to overcome challenges associated with gender stereotyping and male dominance within SRC structures. They should take proactive steps to strengthen their leadership competencies, assert their authority and resist limiting gender expectations that may undermine their confidence, participation and effectiveness in leadership.

SRCs, in collaboration with the universities, should strengthen and enforce zero-tolerance mechanisms on sexual harassment and exploitation, particularly within student political and sponsorship systems. Access to sponsorship and institutional opportunities should be governed by transparent criteria to minimise opportunities for exploitation.

Universities should review and address exclusionary practices within student governance structures that limit female students' access to leadership positions and decision-making processes. This will ensure equitable access to leadership opportunities by enforcing constitutional provisions governing student (SRC) leadership.

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